



Hakata Tonkotsu Ramens

vol.5

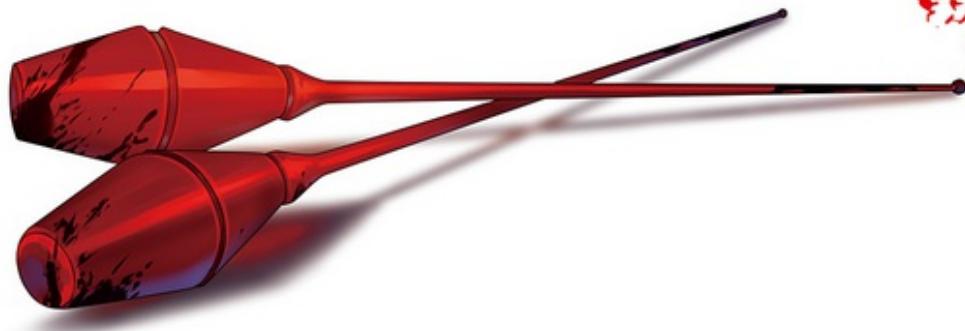
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Novel Updates

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Seasonal Opening Ceremony & First Inning



Seasonal Opening Ceremony

“There’s a clown,” the boy said. The boy, his mother, and younger sister had walked to the parking lot together, and just as they got into the car, the boy spotted an oddly dressed man.

Even after the noise and bustle of the festival, his mother was busy attending to his young sister. She was wiping off the crepe remains from around his sister’s mouth. She was not paying attention to him.

That was not just for today either. His mother was always preoccupied with his sister. He felt dejected. When he looked out the window in the back seat tiresomely, he saw a red silhouette at the edge of his peripheral vision.

He wore a gaudy outfit with a red hat. His face was painted white, and he had a round nose – unmistakably a clown.

“Mama, there’s a clown.”

He called out to his mother again.

The man dressed as a clown passed by the parking space and vanished into a narrow alleyway, as though he was sucked in by the darkness.

“A clown?” His mother finally responded to him. However, she was still facing his sister. She was trying to take a picture of her daughter eating the crepe with her Polaroid camera.

“Look, over there,” the boy pointed with his right hand outside the window. His left hand held the toffee apple his mom had purchased for him on their way back.

His mother glanced outside the window.

“He’s not there.”

His mother shrugged, “you sure you aren’t seeing things?”

Her son was just lying to get her attention; nothing more than a child’s nonsense. Her words held those nuances.

“But there was one.”

When he raised his voice, irritated, his mother made an annoyed expression.

I'm not lying. I know I saw a clown.

Why won't she believe me? The boy began to feel discontent.

"Perhaps. It is a festival, so maybe there are clowns around."

I believe there was one on the stage, right? His mother replied, disregarding him.

He was getting more annoyed.

Just then, his sister – three years younger than him – started to get cranky. She made the teary expression and said she needed to pee. She seemed like she was a minute away from going, and their mother scowled, "You couldn't tell me sooner?"

"We're going to go to the restroom," their mom got out of the car and instructed him. "Wait here."

She picked up his sister and left him behind.

Left alone in the car, the boy was bored. The figure of the red man came to his mind. *Where did that clown from earlier go?*

And with pure curiosity, he moved. He picked up the Polaroid camera left in the backseat and got out of the car. The item belonged to his mother, which she used to make an album to take pictures of his sister and record her growth. His mother had always told him to never touch it without permission, but that had completely slipped his mind. All he thought about was to take a photo of the clown with this camera. If he took a photo, then his mother would have to believe him. That there was a clown. That he was not lying.

He moved ahead into the direction the red figure had disappeared to. And there, in an unpopulated alleyway, there was a small vacant land at the end. A black car was parked there.

The boy stopped walking.

There he is.

There was the clown. The clown stood in front of the vacant area. He wore red garments with a red hat. He was illuminated by the street lamp, making him look like he was under the spotlight on a stage amidst the darkness.

I need to take a picture.

He held up the camera immediately. He peeked through the lens with one eye. The clown was moving as though dancing in the small and round scope. When he looked closer, he saw the clown was holding something in both hands. They were street performing clubs. The clown was twirling them around skillfully while laughing loudly.

There were three other men in the empty land lot besides the clown. All of them were facing the clown. *Were they spectators?*

Just as the boy was estimating when to take a shot, the clown suddenly moved. And in the same moment, the men began to shout.

The clown had attacked them.

The clown hit one man consecutively with the blunt weapons he held with a faint smile on his face. Then he turned to the men attempting to escape and threw something that glinted – small knives. They pierced the mens' tendons, and they lost their footing, collapsing onto the thicket. The clown hit the men unable to move and cowering on the ground, smiling all the while.

Even the boy's young mind knew what was happening.

The clown is killing people.

To the boy's eyes, the clown was not a person; it was a foreign existence that was akin to a monster. The boy was petrified in front of the abnormal scene. He could not move. His body was shaking. His trembling unintentionally put pressure into his index finger, pushing down the trigger and taking a photo. There was a flash, illuminating the area in a bright light.

The clown took notice of him. His unsettling white face quickly turned around and stared at him.

The Polaroid camera spat out the photo the boy just took.

"Hey,"

The boy heard a sudden voice.

The clown's white face was right in front of him.

The boy was startled and cringed in fright. The camera clattered to the ground, and with it the sound of it breaking.

“Who are you?”

The clown, splattered with blood on his person, loomed over him, examining him closely. *I need to get away.* The boy thought and turned on his heel.

A red arm reached out to him from behind.

Top of the First Inning

It was nearing mid-September, and with it the Fukuoka region began to turn to a season easier to survive in than the harsh dregs of heat it had underwent. It was clear weather, neither hot or cold in temperature. Above their heads was a fine autumn sky without any clouds in it.

It was an ideal day for grass-lot baseball.

Today was one of their custom practice days for each week, and the Ramens rented a public sports ground in the city. The first to arrive was the team's midfielders, Zenji Banba and Xianming Lin.

“.....What the hell,” Lin looked around the deserted sports ground and said. “No one's here.”

“We're the first to arrive.”

The two placed their bags down on the benches. After they did some light workouts and practiced pitches, they began playing catch. They were doing so to spend time until the other members arrived.

“They're taking their sweet time. Hope they aren't slacking just because we don't have a game.”

“Hey, dontcha say that now. There could be traffic.”

After some time, the Tonkotsu Nine began to appear in uniform one after the other. The centerfielder Enokida, the pitcher Saitou, and the first baseman Martinez came together. The two of them carpooled over in Martinez's car.

“Huh?” Enokida asked as he sat down on the bench, “it's just you two? Where is everyone else?”

“Haven’t showed up yet.”

The other members were the catcher Shigematsu, the third baseman Saeki, and the outfielders Yamato and Jiro. And lastly, the coach Genzo.

“That’s right,” Martinez frowned. “Jiro said he can’t come today.”

“Ah, work then?”

All the Tonkotsu Nine members aside from Saitou did underground work. They never knew when they would get a sudden job.

“No. Tomorrow is Misaki’s class observation day. He said she still hasn’t finished her essay for class.”

“An essay?”

“Yeah,” Martinez nodded. “She’s writing an essay with the topic ‘my future dream.’”



My future dream, Misaki Tanaka.

My father’s name is Jiro. My father is my dad and my mom. So that’s why I call him Jiro-chan. Jiro-chan’s job is as an avenger. Avengers carry out vengeance for people. So they punch or kill bad people. Jiro-chan is always trying his best at his job for his clients. He’s really cool. I love that Jiro-chan. So I think I want to become an outstanding avenger like Jiro-chan. I want to punch and kill people to heal people’s hearts.

“Oh, my dear Misaki, why you.....!”

After Misaki finished reading the draft for her assignment she wrote up, Jiro was moved to tears; overcome with emotion and shaking minutely. He then kissed Misaki on the cheek with a huge smooch.

“I’m so moved. Seriously, you’re such a nice girl.” Jiro placed smooches on both sides of her cheeks before the smile receded from his face. “But this is no good. This is completely out. Rewrite it.”

“Ehh.” Misaki pouted, sitting at her brand new study table.

“No ‘ehh’ this. Naturally it won’t do. If you submit this to your school teacher, someone from the child consultation center will drop by and they’ll take your beloved Jiro-chan to the police.”

“I tried my best to write this though.”

Misaki was discontent.

“Then what can I write about?”

“That’s fair.....” Jiro looked around Misaki’s room while stroking his beard. Only the bare minimum for furniture was in the room, almost bleak like a business hotel. “How about writing you want to be a florist or a baker?”

“I want to become an avenger.”

“You can’t say that.”

Misaki objected. “I don’t really want to become those. Not a florist or a baker.”

“You can make a list of lies for your essay.”

Misaki muttered a mere exasperated ‘hmmm’ with an uninterested expression.

“Then how about writing that you want to become the wife of someone you like?”

He tried to suggest, but there was hardly a reaction from her. “Why? That sounds stupid.”

“Isn’t it fine to be a bit romantic? Misaki-chan, do you have one? A kid you like or someone you’re interested in?”

“There’s no one,” when he made the attempt to bring up an interesting subject, Misaki turned it down.

“The elementary schoolers are all just kids. I have no interest in them.”

She was, however, still an elementary schooler and a kid as well.

“Oh I see. You like the older kids.”

“If I were to pick a lover,” what fell from her lips was the name of a man he

did not expect. "I think I'd like someone like Zen-chan. He's nice and cool."

By Zen-chan she meant Zenji Banba. Misaki had been emotionally attached to him since long ago.

"You should give up on men like that."

He answered her seriously.

"Ehh, why?"

"Men like that are the type that will put you through trouble if you date them. Totally."

"Why would you know that?"

"I have an abundance of experiences in life. I wasn't an okama when I was around my twenties for nothing." He had ended up derailing from the main topic. After he cleared his throat, he returned to the topic. " – Say, Misaki. Do you have anything you want to do?"

Misaki was quiet at that. She seemed to be thinking it over.

After a while,

".....I want to play baseball."

she muttered.

"Baseball?"

"I want to join boys baseball."

Misaki's expression was dead serious.

It was true that a boys baseball team would even let girls in.

"Why baseball again?"

There should be plenty of other options than baseball to try out. Like playing the piano or ballet.

"If I can play baseball, I can join the Ramens, right?"

Misaki stated.



“.....Future dream, huh.” Banba lightly smiled in nostalgia. “I wanted to be a professional baseball player.”

“Me too,” Martinez piped up while practicing his swings. According to rumor, he apparently belonged to the major league baseball team academy in his home country, the Dominican Republic, back in his twenties.

“Same with me,” Saitou added. He also was had a past linked to baseball as a high school player.

At some point, the topic had changed from Misaki’s essay to talking about their own childhood dreams.

“Seriously? All of you wanted to be baseball players?”

I guess I never really had a dream, though, Lin thought back to his past. Back then, he was desperate to just survive day to day. If he was pressed to give an answer, then he supposed his sole dream was to become a great hitman to support his family.

“Ah, that’s right.”

Banba suddenly raised his voice while they were in the middle of chatting on the benches.

“I got a favor to ask you, Saitou-kun.”

“What is it?” Saitou looked up at him while he was tying the laces of his spiked shoes.

“Can ya pitch a sinker?”

“A sinker?” Saitou caught the ball Banba threw and checked his grip on it. “Well, I did many times in the past, but I didn’t have enough control, so I wasn’t allowed.”

“I want to hit a sinker. I’d appreciate it if you could give me some practice.”

“Then, yes, of course.” If he could throw more pitches, it would improve his pitching ability. Saitou gave his ready consent. “I’m going to make some

practice pitches, so who could act as catcher?"

"Mar-san, you be catcher," Banba handed him over a catcher's mitt.

"Alright, fine by me."

Martinez, who was designated to fill in for Shigematsu as catcher, put on his protective gear. He crouched down behind the home plate, ready for any of Saitou's pitches.

After Saitou made a couple of pitches, he then made one with the grip for a sinker. His trajectory and control was still weak, but practice makes perfect. He aimed for the mitt and released the ball earnestly.

Getting an idea of the trajectory, Banba stepped in on the left side of the batter's box. Martinez cocked his head seeing that. ".....Ah? You're a leftie?"

Banba should have been a right-handed pitcher and batter. Normally he stood in the right side of the batter's box.

"I thought to change sides."

Banba grinned.

Saitou faced the catcher and threw the ball instantly. Martinez safely managed to catch it. He did not seem to be that inferior to Shigematsu.

"That reminds me, Shigematsu isn't here," Lin said in a near whisper.

"Shigematsu-san seems to be busy with an investigation." Enokida answered next to him. "Apparently there have been a few murders."



".....What the hell is this?"

Shigematsu slipped under the yellow tape set up around the area and stepped into the scene of the murders, grimacing at the bizarre scene. In front of him was a telephone pole, and on it a body was hung. And for some reason he was upside down. Both his legs were bound by rope and was suspended upside down by the bolts in the post's scaffolding.

A few meters away on another telephone poll was another body. And past

that one was another body. All together, there were three bodies. All of them were hung on the telephone poles in an identical manner.

“Shigematsu-san.”

One of his juniors that arrived at the scene first approached him when he saw Shigematsu. He explained the situation, reading off a handheld notebook. “There are three victims. Two are from the yakuza, the Noma Group, and the other is the yakuza’s dealer.”

The junior then pointed to the nearby vacant land. There was a vehicle parked there.

“They seemed to have been attacked while they were having their drug dealing at that vacant land. All the drugs were burned.”

“Is that so?”

“We can assume this involved another gang.”

There could have been some form of conflict between them and an opposing gang.

“There is that possibility.....But we still do not know.”

Shigematsu gave an indecisive reply. He looked up at the bodies, arms crossed and groaned. There were plenty of people that someone from an underground organization would know to dispose of the bodies. And yet for them to have left the bodies in this state meant there had to be a reason for it.

“.....Maybe it was a warning.”

Perhaps the bodies were used as a message to address someone.

“What’s the cause of death?”

“We don’t have anything until an autopsy is performed,” the junior provided. “From what he could tell, they suffered from great hemorrhage, but they were also hit in the head. We don’t know which wounds proved to be the most fatal.”

Two of the men in forensics finished taking photos of the street and took down the bodies. Shigematsu looked over the bodies’ faces that got laid out on the ground and noticed something. “Their faces are smudged.”

When he looked closer, he saw there was something on the victims' faces. It looked like blood, but it did not look like it was from a cut. It was contrived. There were heart and star shaped markings drawn on the side of the bodies' cheeks with blood. They were as though a child had scribbled on their faces.

".....These are some pretty fancy bodies for it to be the yakuza's work."

Bodies hung in reverse and shapes drawn on their faces. Shigematsu started to lose the line of reasoning for an organization to be the culprit.

In an attempt to process the situation, Shigematsu looked around the scene. There were three victims. They were attacked in the middle of a drug deal. All the products in the car were artlessly burned.

Who would the culprit be? Someone from the underground? Did they have a grudge against these guys? What was their objective? Was it the people or the drugs?

No, it was the people. Their objective was to kill the three men, otherwise they would not have left the men in that state.

So the culprit killed the three men and hung them on telephone poles. And they did it in a ridiculous fashion by not only drawing on their faces but by making them hang upside down as well.

"Why would they do that?"

Shigematsu tilted his head in confusion, examining the dead men's faces.

He could not understand the theme (intent) for these bodies no matter how much he thought over it.

Bottom of the First Inning

The clown was always smiling and always crying. He smiled as he stabbed people and cried as he punched them. He told himself that this was his mission. He was merely obsessed to do these acts based off of his disproportionate ideas of justice, not following the final say of what was considered good or evil as depicted by the law.

'The next news.'

When the clown turned on the television, the incident was being reported.

‘Three male bodies were discovered on a road in Fukuoka City the other night. The victims were members of the Noma Group, so the police are looking into finding out if this was an organization dispute.’

The clown sat on the sofa and thought over what happened the night before. He recalled the sensation of the moment he struck the men’s head vividly in his palms.

That made him remember something, and he went to open the trunk to his car. In a large, oblong bag were his street performing clubs and a disposable cell phone. The phone was stolen from the drug dealer he killed yesterday. The clown had looked through the messages on there, but he was unable to find information on other organizations or dealers. It was unfortunate.

However, he found a certain piece of information instead. This dealer was in connections with an informant in this city.

The announcer on the TV read the next incident. ‘A local resident found the body of a young girl thrown away in a garbage dump. The two unemployed parents of the child have been arrested with charges for dumping a body.’

The clown instantly looked up and just as quickly stood up. He grasped the edges of the TV with both hands and gazed deeply into the screen.

‘Bruises from physical assault were found on the body, and the two admitted to the charges. They proclaimed they only planned on disciplining their child, but the girl had stopped moving when she got hit. They panicked and threw her away. It is apparent now that the child has been a victim to abuse on a regular basis-’

Abuse.

The clown felt a scorching heat raise up in his body at the term.

‘There is always a link to abuse.’

The different commentators on the program began discussing amongst themselves, imputing their opinions.

‘It is said that children who were abused by their parents have a tendency to

abuse their children when they become adults.'

".....A link?"

The clown muttered.

"Link,"

This was it then.

"Abuse, link."

He decided on his next target.

The clown began humming. He turned away from the TV and held a throwing knife -his stock-in-trade – in his right hand. He focused and threw it at the darts board hung on the wall. The knife struck the board dead center skillfully.



The black shape flung from his right hand. It whizzed by and struck the human shaped dummy that was its target. It landed not far from where he had meant to hit it. His aiming he had trouble with had somewhat improved.

Konya City in the northern Kokura ward, Kyushu City. There were numerous bars lined up along this street, which was located next to the monorail Tanga Station. Shunsuke Saruwatari frequented the darts bar at one of the corners there, the Lady Madonna. At first glance it looked like any ordinary bar where young people would hang out at. The owner, however, was a mediator for assassination jobs, and the basement was a floor reserved for assassins – where regular customers were prohibited.

There was a shooting practice area in one of the corners on the basement floor. There were three human shaped dummies against the wall for anyone to practice their skills in using throwing weapons.

Saruwatari was throwing shuriken at that spot. He had nearly used all fifty ninja weapons his partner had prepared for him: four-sided shuriken, eight-sided shuriken, and kunai. There were countless black objects sticking out of the

dummies.

“They look like human cactuses.”

A bespectacled man said, glancing at the dummies with shuriken sticking out of them from head to toe. The man was a killer consultant known as Naoya Nitta, as well as Shunsuke Saruwatari’s business partner.

“Those poor dummies.....” Nitta lamented forcefully while pulling out the shuriken neatly. “They got so much damage.....”

“I’ve got nothing to do, so what else am I supposed to spend my time?”

That was right; Saruwatari was on break. Executives from the largest organizations in Kitakyushu were being arrested quickly due to the police’s battle strategy against them, leaving the organizations to crumble. Because of those events happening, there had been a decrease in the amount of jobs coming in recently.

“But look. It’s gotten much easier to spend some time outside, and the food for the fall season is great. Maybe no one is in the mood to have someone killed.”

There was nothing else for Saruwatari to do other than to throw shuriken. However, he was at the end of his rope doing this to kill time now.

“How about you do something, you damn consultant.”

“When he leaned back against his chair, Nitta lightly nudged his legs.

“It’s bad manners to rest your feet on the table.”

“Shut up,” Saruwatari muttered, glaring at him. “Whatever is fine. Just get me work.”

“And who was the one who said ‘I’m not gonna do this boring job!’ and gave nothing but complaints whenever I brought him work?”

“Hell if I know.”

Saruwatari made a small sigh. *That glasses punk was annoying.*

“.....I don’t care who. I want to kill someone.” For some reason a certain hitman’s face came to his mind. “Since I’m off right now, I guess I could go kill

that stupid mask guy.”

Provoking that man – the hitman wearing the red Niwaka mask – into a fight could possibly disperse some of his boredom.

“I don’t think even the Niwaka Samurai has the time to play around with you.”

“.....” *Even though I’m off, he isn’t? That pisses me off.*

“The busy season will come around soon enough, so how about you rest up now? Alright?”

Saruwatari did not reply.

“.....Alright, guess I’ll have to,” Nitta sighed, making a troubled smile. It was the expression he would often make when he shook his head for a sign. “I’ll reach out for anything all the way to Fukuoka.”

Second Inning

Top of the Second Inning

Mothers were crowded around the elementary school's gate to pick up their children. It was not that fathers were not present at all, but they were rarely there, making Jiro stand out among the crowd.

I'm so glad I wore a suit, he sighed in relief. If he had appeared in another abnormal, ill rumors could have been spread. The other parents would have gossiped among themselves, wondering what Misaki's father did for work. Jiro had to play the role of 'a nice father who slipped out of work to pick up his child,' so they would not look too far into him.

The children left the school one after the other, escorted by their parents. Next to them stood a woman waving her hand with a smile. She was Misaki's homeroom teacher. Naturally they were well acquainted. She seemed to recall Jiro's face as she greeted him with a bow when their eyes met. "Tanaka-san, good afternoon."

"Good afternoon, sensei," Jiro returned the smile. "I'm sorry I was late to get her."

"Oh, it's no problem. We're grateful that you'd come all the way here despite work."

A boy in the local area went missing yesterday. Someone has apparently been kidnapping children, and the culprit has still not been caught. Because of the incident, the elementary school Misaki went to had ended earlier and the parent's day visit had also been cancelled. Parents would have to drop off and pick up their children for a while.

Jiro had been looking for Misaki earlier, but he did not find his child. ".....So where's Misaki right now?"

"Misaki-chan is waiting in the classroom. I'll take you there," the homeroom teacher suggested. "I was just about to head back to the classroom myself."

She was going to show him around. He was grateful. The interior of the school

was a complicated maze, so he felt like he would get lost no matter how many times he had come here.

The two of them began to walk towards the school building when the homeroom teacher spoke to him quietly. "The truth is, I had something I wanted to talk with you about."

Jiro was taken aback and accidentally replied in an exhausted voice, "wha-?"

The instructor continued, having difficulty wording what she wanted to say. "I feel like Misaki-chan is having a difficult time making friends."

Having a difficult time making friends. Jiro was startled at those words, his eyes widening. "Is that girl being bullied?"

"No, that's not it. She talks with the other children and is part of the circle just fine."

He was relieved with that out of the way. But then the teacher added.

"It's just, she sometimes makes a very cold expression. Even when she's smiling, she has these cold eyes....."

That was a familiar sounding scenario.

Misaki hardly smiled. Jiro had never seen her laugh in a large voice or hold her waist from her laughter. Her expression was stagnant, and it was difficult to tell what she was thinking.

"Even in her circle of friends, I feel like she doesn't really give an honest smile.....I suppose it'd be better to say she's trying to fit in with everyone else than to say she's just poor at expressing herself."

Misaki would smile with the other girls in the class during break. But her smile was a lie. Since she could not open up to anyone, she played the elementary school girl getting along with everyone. All while ridiculing her classmates in her mind, thinking they were all stupid. Jiro could easily imagine his child doing that. He slumped his shoulders.

"Perhaps she has difficulty connecting with the other children because she's being single-handedly raised by me, a male, as ashamed as I am to admit it." It may have been a desperate excuse, but Jiro had nothing else to go with.

They had arrived to the classroom in that time. When they checked inside, Misaki was there, looking at her desk intently. She had her notebooks and drill sheets spread out on it. She seemed to be working on her homework for the day.

“Tanaka-san, your father is here for you.”

Misaki looked up when the teacher addressed her. Jiro felt her usual cold expression softens once she saw his face.

“Sorry to have kept you waiting, Misaki,” Jiro smiled at Misaki while she stuffed her belongings into her knapsack.

He placed his right hand on top of her head when she approached him.
“Alright, let’s go home.”

Misaki nodded readily.

“Well then, take care, sensei.”

“Goodbye, sensei,” Misaki also bowed her head the same way Jiro did.

“Hey, Misa-chan.”

Jiro addressed the girl walking beside him once they had left the school.

“What is it?”

“.....Is school fun?”

Her homerun teacher’s words had been bothering him.

Misaki had fallen silent. *I must have asked something stupid*, Jiro regretted to himself. There was no way she would find it fun.

After a few moments of silence, Misaki stated, “If I said I didn’t enjoy it, would it be okay if I don’t go?”

“No, it wouldn’t.....”

He regretted asking her that again. His question had been a failure.

“I know,” Misaki replied, still facing forward. “It’s boring, but I don’t really hate it. I’m doing alright with the other kids around me, so it’s fine.”

‘Doing alright,’ and ‘it’s fine.’ Those words were not of that of an elementary

schooler.

“More importantly, Jiro-chan.”

“What is it?”

“Why are you in a suit?”

Misaki glanced over at him and pouted, “you could have just worn what you usually wear.” She did not seem very pleased.

“Isn’t it fine to spice things up by wearing this on occasion? Does it not look good on me?”

When he asked her that, Misaki shook her head. Jiro already figured out what she wanted to say, but he had to avoid it.

“Jiro-chan, you always wear a suit when you come to my school. And you talk like a guy then too.”

She was unhappy that he played the role of a ‘normal father.’

“But wouldn’t you get bullied? Others would poke fun at you saying, ‘your dad is an okama,’ right?”

“I hate it more than you are bearing with it.”

“I’m not.”

“You are.”

Misaki’s reply was unusually stern.

“You’re doing that and bearing with it for my sake.” Her expression clouded over, and she cast her gaze downward. “Even back then with the cigarettes -”

Misaki cut off.

Jiro knew what she tried to say when she mentioned cigarettes. He could not say anything. Finishing what she was going to say would just awaken her tragic memories.

Instead, he gave a kind suggestion, “how about we go and buy some cake and head home?”



Without any clients in the Banba Detective Office, Banba spent his free time as he usually would. He stood topless in front of the mirror and practiced his swings, examining his batting form.

Out of Banba's periphery, Lin was folding their training gear he had just washed. Just when he picked up the deep blue undershirt, he recalled the last practice session.

"That reminds me."

Lin called out to Banba, who was continuing with his practice swings.

"Hm?" Banba turned to face him.

"What's up with you all of the sudden?"

"For what?"

"Switching which side to bat from. You're a right-handed batter, right? So why did you start practicing batting with your left?"

That was not the only thing; he had asked an odd request to Saitou as well.

"And then you suddenly proclaimed that you wanted to hit a sinker."

Banba wiped his cheeks and replied to Lin's question in a murmur.

".....Ah, just a little somethin'."

You're hiding something, aren't you? Lin glared at him.

Banba ignored Lin and started swinging again. It bothered him how open he was lately, so he had been trying to fix his form carefully. This man was always taking things so seriously when it came to baseball.

"So I take it you were telling the truth when you said you wanted to be a baseball player."

"Well, yeah," Banba smiled bitterly. "It was an occupation I admired."

It was a dream for any baseball boy to have. However, in Banba's case it was not just a dream.

“I really put the effort to make it happen. I practiced in the club teams since I was in elementary and even got in the baseball club in high school. I thought someday I could get into the draft team or an independent league and be an active member of society that way.”

“Really?” Lin lifted his head curiously when Banba spoke of his past – a rare occurrence. “So why did a high school baseball kid like you, aiming to become a professional, become a hitman instead?”

Banba chuckled.

“Who knows.” He cocked his head and replied back ambiguously. “How did that happen?”

His tone indicated he himself did not know the answer rather than it was an attempt in evading the question.

“How ‘bout we go out for ramen?” Banba put on a shirt and suggested to Lin. It was almost time for dinner anyway.

They headed to the usual food stall.



That reminds me, Jiro thought back.

He had never heard Misaki mention the name of a friend even once. She had never stated anything to him like any other elementary schooler would like ‘I’m going to hang out with someone today’ or ‘I’m going to hang out at so-and-so’s house today.’ She had never brought any friends from class to their house either. Jiro vaguely sensed that she did not have any classmates she was particularly close to, but the situation could be far more severe than he originally thought.

When he thought back to his own elementary school days, he felt like he only had fun days. He never had felt constrained and was able to chase the ball around the school grounds on breaks, spending his time freely. But for Misaki’s case, he felt like she just accepted as compulsory education.

“.....Raising a child is so hard.”

Jiro chugged down the beer left for him on the table and sighed. This was his third glass.

Jiro dropped by Genzo's shop after Misaki had fallen asleep. He thought he could drown his sorrows and have someone to complain to, but then Martinez and Enokida, followed by Zenji Banba and Xianming Lin, appeared together and it had gotten quite rambunctious.

"How are ya holdin' up, Jiro? You're makin' this fretful face." Genzo leaned forward, refilling his beer.

"If ya got somethin' troublelin' you, we'll listen," Banba who sat next to him drew closer.

After Jiro made another sigh, he stated. "I went to Misaki's school today."

"Ah yeah. For that parent's day event, right?"

"No, the event got cancelled. There was that incident with a child being abducted, right? The culprit hasn't been caught, so for the time being the parents will have to drop off and pick up their children since it's too dangerous."

"Apparently in America, parents dropping off and picking up their kids is seen as common sense." Enokida cut into the conversation. "There are states where it's required for them to have information on known sex offenders available to the public under Megan's Law, and pedophiles receive terrible treatment in prisons. They are even looked down upon by other convicts."

"That's the natural response. Pedos are despicable." Martinez also piped in.

"It's really only Japan that is fine with leaving their kids alone."

After Jiro nodded in agreement he returned to the main topic at hand. "So when I went to get Misaki, her homeroom teacher told me that she doesn't open up to the people around her and would sometimes have this cold gaze."

Misaki's upbringing was unique. She had been abused by her stepfather and abandoned by her mother.

Apparently children who were abused have a chilling cold gaze. Their emotions freeze, having been hurt by those who were supposed to be their

protector and betrayed many times. Jiro knew Misaki's cold expression she sometimes made was the same as the characteristic other abused children have.

However, Jiro did not think that was the only cause of that as of late. He had Misaki assist him in his underground work for some time now, and there was something that he vividly remembered even now.

"When I took a job to avenge a man's death, Misaki suddenly insisted on helping me. I was at first against it. But she told me, 'if there are too many people, then you'll be in trouble. A child like me could make them drop their guard.' Her plan was to pretend to be an innocent girl and get close to them to inject them with a muscle-relaxant."

"Ahh," Martinez nodded, recalling that case. "You mean that one? She did a good job."

"Yeah, she did.....She accomplished that without a change in expression at all."

Misaki took action exactly as according to plan. She was unafraid of the man and did not tremble from anxiety; she was calm and composed.

And that reminded him of a sense of impending danger.

".....That's frightening, isn't it?" Jiro cast his gaze downward, examining his wrists. "I'm wondering if I'm raising Misaki to be this terrifying monster."

This was not normal. He had to have been raising her the wrong way.

"That's why I try not to talk about work in front of Misaki, and I don't let her tag along with me for any dangerous jobs."

"That's wise." Lin stated. "What a child learns when they're young isn't easy to break off from when they become an adult."

".....Yes, exactly."

"If she is raised learning about crime, then she'll lose the feelings of dejection and guilt towards crime."

Lin had apparently been raised in an establishment which produced hitmen. With him having personally experienced that, his words stung Jiro's heart.

Lin had lived killing people. Even though he now played as a member of the Ramens team, at first he did not listen to what people told him to do. He would not stick to the rules or follow their signs and would take actions on his own, without considering everyone else.

“I know you care a lot about her, but I think what’s going on right now will be bad for her later. If you want to raise her as a normal kid, then do it in a way where she’s not involved in crime.” Lin told him while slurping down his ramen.

He had changed. Jiro thought that to himself as he gazed at him from the side. Lin would now progressively participate in their practice sessions, and Genzo commented that he had started to choose his own jobs recently. It was the change in environment that had changed Lin. His connection with others had nurtured his human heart.

“Hey, Banba-chan, give me some tips.” Jiro elbowed the man drinking his beer next to him.

“Tips?”

“Tips in raising a kid.”

“Ha? You got a kid?” Lin’s eyes widened. “You have a love child or something?”

“What? No, I ain’t got none.”

“But you got a big kid, right?” Jiro glanced over to Lin and asked Banba. “How did you manage to raise him to be so modest?”

“Hey, he didn’t raise me.” Lin scowled.

Enokida was the next to speak up. “A child will grow up healthy if you provide them with the standard love normally. Children who don’t receive love or children who are given twisted love or put under excessive pressure will grow up more or less twisted.”

“Oh, are you talking from personal experience? That’s got some weight to it,” Martinez said to him in a teasing tone.

“I also agree if this continues as is it’ll be bad for her later.” After Enokida had glared at the large, swarthy man for a moment, he continued on. “As long as

you're beside her, Misaki-chan will grow up watching you. She'll end up thinking that she will have to commit crimes in order to carry out vengeance, meaning she'll have a life like ours in the future."

So her living together with him would not be to her benefit after all. "..... What do you think I should do?"

"If you want her to be the successor for the avenger business, then I think you can keep doing what you're doing now. If you want her to grow up as a normal child, then she has go back to living a normal life." Enokida stated. "Children grow up terrifyingly fast. You should let her go as quickly as possible."

"Shouldn't you consider what the person herself would want?"

Lin objected Martinez's thought. "But naturally she would want to stay with Jiro."

"Then what are the other options? Send her back to her mother? Or find her new parents?"

"Her mother won't do." Jiro had never contacted Misaki's mother again since that one time. At the time, she had another man's child in her womb. By now she should have a new family and would be proceeding towards the second phase in her life.

"Then that leaves foster parents. I heard there are more foster parents that will help out immediately."

"Or perhaps Jiro could cut his ties with this industry."

Jiro was at a lost of words at Genzo's suggestion.

Cut his ties.

If he were to consider it with Misaki's best interests in mind, that would be the right path to take. But he could not give up being an avenger.

What caused Jiro to start this job was the death of his lover. Taking revenge on the man who had killed his lover was his origin as an avenger. His love had died in suffering. And he could not do a single thing about it. He hated and resented himself for it. Maybe it was just his ego. Yet on that day, Jiro had imposed punishment on himself, choosing to take the path to live as an

avenger.

So now if he were to go back to living a normal life. If he were to live his life carefree and happy, he would not be able to bear it. He would not be able to face his lover.

“By doin’ work as an avenger, you’re causin’ all kinds of people to hold resentment against ya. Misaki could get caught up in the mix and get hurt. There’s no tellin’ when some fella is gonna go after ya and show up one day.”

What Genzo said was absolutely true.

If in the one in a million chance something were to happen to Misaki because of his work, Jiro would regret it. Just like when he had lost his lover.

Danger would follow him around as long as he stayed with Misaki and spent time around her on a regular basis. There was the possibility when someone who did hold a grudge against the avenger shows up they would target Misaki, not him.

“Be careful of someone seeking vengeance from the avenger.”

The avenger being revenged.

Genzo’s warning stuck in Jiro’s head uncomfortably.

There could be a day when the tip of the spear would be pointed at them. That was linked to being an avenger.

Bottom of the Second Inning

Their meeting place was at a tranquil restaurant similar to that of a coffee shop in Hakata. After giving his order to the middle-aged owner behind the counter, Sanjou took a seat in the center of the table. He glanced over the morning newspaper spread out on the table while eating his light meal and sipping his coffee. The words ‘three young children gone missing’ caught his eye. The incident was from the day before, while going back home after the festival. A mother went with her youngest daughter to the restroom, and when she had returned to the car her boy was not inside. Apparently the child was abducted by someone after getting out of the car on his own.

Professionals’ opinions were published as well. The culprit was likely to be a

male in his thirties or forties. He would be living alone or with his parents, without a spouse or children. He would have had to have caused minor offenses in the past like making attempts at calling out to children and taking them away somewhere. That was what was written there.

Sanjou smiled at the criminal image made up by a criminal psychologist. When a child gets kidnapped, naturally sexual predators were suspected; anyone who had a preference only for children or could only get turned on by children. The police would investigate anyone with that criminal history.

“You look like a normal salary man reading the newspaper like that.”

When Sanjou was about to reach out to pick up his hot cup of coffee on the table, he was suddenly called out by someone.

He looked up from the newspaper. Before him stood a man. He was short with a protruded stomach. He wore a suit but had a work shirt instead of a jacket. There was an embroidered seal for Yamazaki Transportation.

The man’s name was Kunio Yamazaki. He was the president of a freight company as well as Sanjou’s business partner. Sanjou’s trade was able to hold up because of his company. He was a huge support for him.

“It’s been an issue recently,” Sanjou gave him a smile back as he folded the newspaper. “I don’t look dignified enough, so I get underestimated by others.”

“That’s not a bad thing. There’s no one but those intimidating looking guys in the yakuza world these days.” Kunio took a seat, sitting across from him. “I’m sorry for calling you out here so suddenly.”

“Not at all.”

Sanjou looked like gentle and kind as any normal salary man would, but he actually held the position as a young leader for the Mutagawa Group. His contradictory appearance had been useful at times. It made others easily place their trust in him. Receiving the support from various entrepreneurs allowed him to push his company to the forefront.

The president of Yamazaki Transportation was also one of Sanjou’s supporters. With the Mutagawa Group managing a contraband trade on drugs and weapons, having a transportation routes was crucial. And with the help of

his company, Sanjou's group was able to send their smuggled products from overseas to their clients across the country swiftly and safely.

Kunio glanced at the newspaper left at the edge of the table. He made a slight grimace when he spotted the term 'missing.' "We haven't been able to find my grandson either."

His grandson, Shota Yamazaki, had suddenly disappeared last year in October.

"You have my sympathies. Your grandson was a high schooler, wasn't he?"

"He was," Kunio nodded. "We found a note that said, 'I'm leaving home. Don't look for me.' That was Shota's handwriting. Because of that, the police weren't able to help us. There are an insane amount of high schoolers who run away from home. The police can't be bothered to look for each and every one of them."

It was said that there were more than 100,000 people who go missing in this country throughout the year.

".....Yes, unfortunately."

If someone ran from home, then that was a family issue. Unless there was something clearly unnatural about their disappearance or their body had been found, they could not use the police for assistance.

"But my daughter wouldn't believe it."

His daughter was Shota's mother, Mieko Yamazaki.

"She still proclaims that Shota wasn't the kind of kid to run away from home and that he's a good kid who never caused any problems."

"She is his mother, so that is to be expected." It was not as though Sanjou could not understand her feelings.

"Mieko asked private detectives to investigate Shota's whereabouts. Ten months passed, and they had no lead. My daughter lost it. She now loses her temper frequently, and she has been ingesting more alcohol and smoking more tobacco."

Sanjou had heard Mieko doted over her son. She must have turned to familiar articles of taste from the loss of her son and stress.

“Sanjou-kun,” Kunio turned his attention to him. “Do you have any children?”

Sanjou shook his head left to right. “I do not.”

He was unmarried and had no children. His parents had already passed away. Sanjou had no one he could call family nearby. He only had a half-brother of a different father who lived in a distant land. Despite only having half the blood relation, his younger brother had identical facial features as he did. However, they only looked similar in that aspect alone; he was a modest person with no relation to the underground world. Sanjou rarely talked with him.

He had felt the desire to be with someone before, but he was in no rush to marry.

“But I can understand where you are coming from.”

“Yeah. Shota was her one child she had after having infertility treatment.”

Shota was the eldest son his daughter wished for whom she had with his son-in-law. And her son had been taken from her. The sudden tragedy that struck her blessed and happy household had left a deep scar in her heart.

Sanjou was irritated at Kunio for not telling him why he had called him out here, but then he realized what it was for. “Could it be what you meant by business-”

“Yes.” Kunio nodded. “I want you guys to look into my grandson.”

“.....I would greatly want to be of help to you,” Sanjou shook his head. “But we’re just the yakuza. We’re not professionals for finding people.”

A detective could not even find a single lead on the case after ten months. There was no way a gang that specialized in smuggling goods could find him.

At that, Kumio had smiled bitterly. “I don’t want you to look for my grandson’s whereabouts. That kid is more than likely dead.”

Sanjou felt a chill behind his tone.

“Dead? Why would you-”

Why would he say that?

“Shota was not as good as we thought he was.”

Kunio shrugged and took out a single photo.

A high school-looking boy wearing a school uniform was sitting in a chair, covered in blood.

“.....This is-”

“It’s Shota.”

“Wha-”

Sanjou lost his words.

Kunio paid no mind to that and continued plainly. “That kid got involved in something. He must have been killed by someone in the underground.I thought it was best to ask someone from the underground to look into the underworld.”

Sanjou was finally able to read his intentions. “So that was what you wanted?”

“I want you to find whoever killed my grandson. I won’t question the methods used. I don’t care how many people die. I plan on paying any price you want. It’ll be a cheap price to pay if it would relieve my daughter even a little bit.”

Sanjou nodded. “Understood. I’ll have my subordinates look into the matter immediately.”

With the main concern addressed, Kunio changed the topic. “That reminds me, how is the new project? Do you think it will go well?”

“Yes,” Sanjou smiled. “I have Ishihara taking charge of it. He said he could have the promised items ready this week.”

What Kunio meant by a new project was a certain good for their smuggling business. The Mutagawa Group primarily managed smuggling goods from outside the country. However, they were going to smuggle out certain goods overseas as a test. If this was successful, they would be able to make another important trade since this could cultivate another route. What they would be dealing had much higher risks than their other products, so Kunio must have been concerned on its progress.

Kunio suddenly looked up. The regional news program was playing on the TV

set up in the restaurant. The middle-aged announcer read off the manuscript with a meek tone of voice. ‘Last night, a third year elementary school child has gone missing-’

A child has gone missing. It was one of the incidents Sanjou saw in the newspaper earlier.

“This country goes into a riot when just one kid goes missing.” Kunio muttered as though to himself, glancing at the TV.

He seemed to be warning Sanjou, ‘so make sure what you’re doing doesn’t cause an uproar.’

‘Moving onto the next incident. Last night, the bodies of three men were discovered on the road in Fukuoka City. Since the victims were members of the Noma Group, the police are looking into whether this was a dispute between gangs or not.’

The Noma Group was an opposing organization to Sanjou’s group. There had several skirmishes with them for providing the same merchandise.

“Is that your guy’s work?” Kazuo looked over at the TV and gave a slight smile.

“No,” Sanjou negated. He was not lying. He did not recall such an event happening. “We have done nothing.”

Sanjou cocked his head while watching the screen, wondering who could have been behind it.

Translation Notes:

If the name Yamazaki sounds familiar, or for any anime or manga only visitors are here who don’t recognize Shota Yamazaki’s name, I recommend checking out the [second inning](#) from the first volume for a refresher of who this person is and what happened to him.

Third Inning

Top of the Third Inning

That afternoon, Lin and Banba put on their baseball gloves and practiced at a park near the office. The case Enokida was involved in had been resolved, and without receiving any clients for assassination work or detective work they spent these past couple of days in peace. They would have gotten stiff lazing about all day in a room, so they would sometimes spend time playing catch as an activity to do.

After they finished their warm up exercises, Lin distanced himself from the other and threw the ball to Banba. He was gradually warming up. The ball got caught in Banba's glove, making a crisp popping sound against the leather material.

There were some elementary schoolers playing on the swings near the park. They heard their clamorous voices from where they were. They seemed to be around the same age as Misaki.

That reminds me, Lin recalled. “What do you think he’ll do?”

Banba questioned him as he took a step forward. “Who do ya mean by he?”

Lin caught the ball Banba threw at him and switched it to his right hand. He then pitched it back at Banba's mitt and answered. “I'm referring to Jiro. Jiro.”

He thought back to their discussion with Jiro at the food stall from the night before. Jiro looked like he was very troubled over whether to let Misaki go or to leave the underground world behind. Or maybe he should go with neither of those and raise Misaki to be the successor as an avenger. Lin wondered if Jiro found an answer.

“If it was you, what would you do?” Lin asked Banba. “What would you do with Misaki?”

“Hmmm.....” Banba threw back the ball while groaning to himself in thought. “I reckon' I'd go find foster parents. It'd be awful if somethin' was to happen to her.”

"Right." Lin was of the same opinion. "So that is what should be done."

If Jiro was not willing to quit his job, then he would have to let Misaki go.

"Well, they have to decide between themselves. It's a family issue, so outsiders can't have a say in it."

Lin instantly froze. He looked over the man with the ball still in his grip.

"But they're both unrelated to each other." Although Banba said it was a family issue, Jiro and Misaki were unrelated to begin with. "They're not related by blood."

"They can be family without being related by blood."

"You can become family with someone just by living together?" Lin cocked his head. "Then are you and I a family?"

"Ain't we?"

".....I really question that." Lin shrugged. He was unsure if that factor alone could make people a family.

To Lin, his family was only his mother and his sister. There was only one other person he had considered to be like family: Feilang. Lin supposed he could have became part of his family as they spent time together in that isolated facility. But that did not happen. Feilang and him took different paths in the end. Lin figured he would never be able to have a family again the day he killed him.

Being related by blood meant they had to bear the responsibility for them. Because Lin was blood related to his mother and sister, he had sacrificed himself for them. He had the resolve to get himself involved in crime for them.

He was uncertain whether he would do the same thing if they were his step-family instead. They would have been strangers then. So perhaps he would not have tried to protect them with his life.

That was how much power there was to being blood related.

"There's no need for Misaki to become a criminal for her step-parent, and likewise there's no need for Jiro to change his lifestyle for his step-daughter. That's what I think anyway."

It would be both to their benefit for Misaki to be let go and to begin a different life.

“It ain’t that easy to split up.” Banba smiled as though troubled. “They’re family.”

Like I said, they’re not. Lin frowned. He could not comprehend what Banba talked about at times.

They finished playing catch and headed back to the office. When they got to the third floor on the stairway they saw a silhouette. A woman was standing in front of the door.

“Do you have business at our office?”

When Banba called out to the woman, she nodded awkwardly.

She was apparently a client.



The woman was named Mari Aikawa. She was in her early to mid thirties and looked ill-starred.

Mari Aikawa stated in a quiet voice, “My daughter went missing. She’s a third year in elementary school. Her name is Rena. She is the eldest among my two children.”

She had told them that Rena Aikawa went to hang out at a classmate’s house the day before and vanished. She gave her request, “I want you to find my daughter’s whereabouts.”

“So why didn’t you go to the police?”

When Banba asked that, the client hung her head. “I still have not told them.....”

“Why wouldn’t you report to them?” Lin, sitting on the side, questioned in an irritated tone. “The first people to turn to would be the police, right? Your child disappeared.”

“There’s a chance that what happened is related to the recent case,” Banba

held Lin back and gently told the woman. "There was just that incident of children being abducted in Fukuoka, so perhaps your Rena-chan was also—"

".....The truth is," Mari Aikawa spoke fearfully. "I got a call from the culprit. They said, 'I've kidnapped your daughter. If you report to the police, I'll kill her.'"

Banba and Lin looked at each other at that.

After they finished talking with her and set up the necessary follow-up, the client left the office. Peeking out the window, Lin muttered as she watched her walk away. ".....Wasn't that weird?"

"It was weird."

"There's something really off, right?"

"Definitely off."

It was a peculiar job request.

"Is it for a ransom? There's no way. Wouldn't someone target a kid from a more wealthy family then?"

It was exactly as Lin said. There was something off about Mari Aikawa.

"It was probably made up. There was no call from the culprit to begin with."

"So that woman was lying after all?"

What the mother said and did made no sense at all. Despite claiming to have received contact from the kidnapper, she seemed not overly concerned for her daughter or the culprit and they did not sense any determination from her for negotiations. That meant that no one had called her. Banba figured that out from the beginning.

"Although she first started off sayin' her daughter disappeared, she then claimed that she was actually kidnapped."

The woman was worried where her daughter went, but she did not want the police to know. So she turned to a private detective. There was one valid reason he could think of.

"There's gotta be a reason for her not wanting the police to get involved."

The police would have to do thorough research into the victim and their family when a child got reported missing. Any acquaintances and friends the family had on a day-to-day basis would be questioned by the police as well. So if there was a reason going to the police would be a problem, then that issue was with Mari Aikawa herself.

“By chance,” Lin said in a low whisper. “Do you think that woman is someone on our side?”

That possibility could be considered. If she was someone related to the underground trade, then naturally she would want to avoid contacting the police. It was also concerning that she would let her young daughter venture outside by herself even though abduction cases were occurring across Fukuoka.

There was something more to her.

“First things first, we gotta look into Rena’s whereabouts.”

Banba stated their objective, and the two got up from their seats and left the office. They headed over to their usual informant.



There was an article on a news website which mentioned some Chinese human traffickers had been arrested. More than 200,000 children go missing a year in China. There were many that were sold to farming communities that lacked workers, but that was not the sole objective.

“.....Human trafficking, huh.” Enokida whispered to himself while drinking his coffee at the cafe he frequented.

The arrests of these people were probably just the tip of the iceberg. The human trafficking syndicate within Asia was complex. Numerous criminal organizations worked together, creating a massive network. They offered a wide range of ages from children to adults and would send them off within the same country or even across the globe.

Humans could be utilized in various applications. They could be put to work as a slave in labor, be objected to prostitution, or be cut to pieces to be sold, in the worst cases. They could even be sold to underground organization

establishments like Xianming Lin was and be raised as a murder weapon. Children were especially defenceless creatures, making them easily targeted by criminals, although there were exceptions to some of the ones captured like Lin.

Enokida closed the news website and opened his e-mail. He got another job request. It was from a drug dealer who was one of his more frequent clients. 'I want information on any parents who are abusive. I need their names and addresses. As many as you can get.'

Enokida read through the message once and tilted his head in confusion. *Why would a drug dealer be looking into abused children?* It was baffling, yet because it was, Enokida found it intriguing.

It was easy to hack into an employee's computer at the child consultation center and steal their reports. Just as Enokida was about to hack into it, he felt a presence behind him. When he looked up from his computer, he saw two familiar faces looking down at him, Banba and Lin. ".....So it's you guys, huh."

"Sup, mushroom." Lin lifted one hand in greeting.

"Why are you two here together?"

Banba took a seat next to Enokida while Lin sat down facing him.

Banba went straight to the topic they wanted to discuss. "Enokida-kun, we got somethin' we want you to look into."

Enokida decided to put off the abusive case for now and turned his full attention to them. "What is it?"

"We got a client that came to the office."

"She said she wanted us to find her kid."

"Another child went missing?" A boy going missing had just happened in Fukuoka the other day. Enokida shrugged. "This is almost like China."

So the parent was desperate to find where their child was right now. People were reminded of the dangers lurking in the world when something happened to their children. The parents would feel regret when they first experience a case like this, lamenting why they left their children all alone.

However, they were too late to regret their actions.

“When did they disappear?”

“Yesterday around three in the afternoon.”

Right now it was past three in the afternoon.

“Unfortunately, they’re probably not alright.” It was well known that after twenty-four hours have passed that the chance of them still being alive was massively low. “What is the child’s name?”

“Rena Aikawa-chan.”

Enokida began working on his computer and found her personal information. “Rena Aikawa. Her mother is Mari Aikawa. Her mother got remarried three years ago. She seems to have two daughters. The eldest is Rena and the youngest is Arisu. Rena was the child of Mari Aikawa’s new husband and is not blood related to her.”

“She disappeared when she went to hang out at a friend’s house. She didn’t even get there. Here are the addresses to Rena-chan’s house and the apartment building her friend lives at.” Banba said and handed over a sheet of paper. “Could ya track Rena-chan’s trail?”

“I’ll try.”

Enokida looked at the two addresses listed on the piece of paper and checked the surveillance cameras along the route between the two houses. When he looked at the footage during the time she had gone missing, he found a little girl on it. He pointed at the screen. “Look here. She’s on the traffic lights’ security camera. She entered the park, but after that she’s gone.”

Rena Aikawa was nowhere to be seen after she entered the park. She was not shown on any other of the cameras. “It’s a residential area here and the public safety is pretty good, so there aren’t many cameras around here.”

The friend’s apartment was past the park, so Rena had to have been taken somewhere around the premises of the park and away from the cameras.

“Are there any security cameras in the apartment buildings?”

“Doesn’t look like it. It’s an old building and security is light.”

“Do you reckon’ this is done by the same fella who kidnapped the boy from

the day before?"

The scene of the crime from the previous day and this one were not far away from each other. Both of the victims were elementary school students. There was enough connections to consider the possibility of them both being done by the same person. "I can't think of a reason it couldn't."

If she was taken within that area, then maybe there were residents living nearby witnessed someone suspicious wandering around.

"At any rate, how 'bout we go and ask people living 'round the park?"

Lin nodded at Banba's suggestion. He then spoke to Enokida. "And can you look into the mother?"

"The mother? Rena Aikawa?"

"Yeah. It seems like there's another side to her."

Enokida grinned hearing that. "Okay~."

Hearing there was something hidden to her character made him want to begin searching.



There was a park not far from the apartment complex Rena Aikawa's friend lived at where Rena meant to go to. Lin took a look around the area when they got out of the car. Around the park were normal residential areas, which seemed unrelated to criminal activities. He could also see young elementary schoolers around. As Enokida said, the public safety was well. "I can hardly believe an abduction would occur in a peaceful place like this."

"Crime can happen anywhere," Banba shrugged.

That's not very hitman-like to say, Lin laughed internally.

"So what now? Should we split up and go around?"

"No, let's make the rounds together today. There's a lot of housewives at home right now."

If some unknown man knocked on their door, they would be suspicious. It

would be easier to talk with them with Lin there since he was dressed like a woman.

They decided to first ask the residents in the apartment building. They checked the community mailbox and saw rooms were labeled from 101 to 708. Among them, there were 56 families. Lin started to feel overwhelmed.

When they hit the intercom for the first room, a middle-aged housewife greeted them, just as Banba expected.

“We’re sorry to bother you while you were busy. We’re from a detective agency.” Banba made an innocent greeting as to not be suspicious before asking. “Do you recognize this child?”

Banba held up the photo of the elementary school girl, and the housewife examined it.

“The truth is this child has lost contact with our client, and they are looking for her. We heard that she was in the nearby park yesterday.”

The housewife cocked her head, placing a hand on her cheek. “I don’t know. I’ve never seen her before.....”

“I see. Thank you for your time.”

The first attempt at bat was a miss. Banba gave his thanks, and they headed to the next room.

They kept asking the other residents for an extended period of time, but they came up with no leads. Even when some of the residents said they saw a child playing at the park, they were uncertain whether that child was the same one as in the photo.

Without any leads, they could not get any results. It had become tedious. They had not even gone through half of them, but they started to feel like giving it up. Getting information was a job that required a fair amount of perseverance.

Lin hung his head as they walked up the staircase. “Shigematsu does this everyday?”

“That’s part of bein’ a police detective.”

“He has my respect.”

It started to get dark outside. Banba suggested. “Let’s be done for today after this one.”

He pressed the intercom for room 408.

Bottom of the Third Inning

The intercom was ringing repeatedly. After a while, the sound changed to knocking. *Was it that caseworker again?* He thought they would have just decided he was not home, but apparently that was not the case.

“Excuse me.”

He heard an unknown man’s voice along with the knocking sound. When he opened the door reluctantly, he saw a man with unkempt hair giving him a forced smile and an unattractive young woman standing beside him.

“You are Ishihara-san, I take it?” The man asked, glancing at the nameplate on the door.

“Yeah, it is.” Ishihara glared at his sudden visitors. “Who are you guys?”

“Sorry to be slow at the introductions. We are from a detective agency.”

“.....Detectives?”

Ishihara became weary of these unexpected guests.

The man called himself Banba. He then held up a piece of paper. It was a photo of a girl.

“We’re looking for the whereabouts of this elementary school student.Do you recognize this girl?”

Ishihara took the photo and looked at it intently.

“.....No, I don’t.”

He said in a shrill voice.

“The truth is this child has been lost in contact with our client. We were tasked into finding her whereabouts.”

“Ah, I see.”

He forced himself to be expressionless when the detective said that.

“We got information that she was seen in this area yesterday.”

“I haven’t seen her. I was at work all day yesterday.”

“.....Is that so? Then sorry for taking your time.”

The man smiled at Ishihara’s reply.

The two then left. After making sure they had left the room, Ishihara turned on his heel and headed to the closet in a traditional Japanese room. When he opened it, inside was a small child. She was bound with tape covered over her mouth. In front of Ishihara was the child with the exact same face as the girl in the photo that was shown to him earlier.

“Shit,” Ishihara tutted. “He screwed it up.”

“I’m home,” just then, he heard a timid voice say. His son had arrived back home.

Ishihara stomped over to the entrance. His son was just taking off his shoes. He was short, making him look like an elementary schooler even though he was a first year in middle school, and he was slim. He was underdeveloped, perhaps due to not eating enough. He was pale and looked like he could collapse at anytime from anemia. His bangs were overgrown, and his complexion was always dark.

“A detective came by.”

When Ishihara said that, his son merely stared at him blankly. Ishihara got irritated for how slow his son was. He had the bad habit of instantly losing his temper.

“A detective came here looking for that kid!”

His son jumped back when he yelled at him.

“You useless bastard!”

Ishihara had moved unconsciously, shoving his son by the shoulders. The boy wavered before collapsing in the entrance way.

“I told you to be careful so we wouldn’t be found out!”

Ishihara grabbed his son by his hair and punched him in the cheek.

They had a room in the corner, and the room next door was vacant. No one would pay attention to them even if he raised his voice or the child sobbed. These factors had encouraged Ishihara's violence.

"I-I'm sorry. I'm sorry." The boy stammered as he wiped the blood from his nose. "I'm sorry, father."

"Shut the hell up!"

When Ishihara raised his right arm for another strike, his cell phone in his breast pocket went off. He instantly stilled his fist.

His right hand, still shaking in anger, shifted to his pocket and picked up the phone. "Hello? This is Ishihara."

'It's me.'

He heard his superior's voice.

"Sanjou-san, nice to hear from you."

'Come to the office right away. We have something to discuss.'

"Understood. I'll head over right away."

Ishihara hung up and made a long sigh. His head cooled down just by a fraction.

".....Hey," He glanced at the blood that had spilled on the floor from his son's bloody nose and demanded. "Clean up the blood."

"I'm sorry," Ishihara left their home while hearing his son's pitiful voice.



On the back of the photo Sanjou received from Kunio Yamazaki a URL was written. When he connected to the internet with his office computer and put in the URL, he was brought to a shady looking page. It was a simple design, with only a video posted in the center of a pitch black background.

Sanjou played the video once all his subordinates assembled. The video displayed a torture scene. Someone who looked like a high schooler from his stand-up collar school uniform was sitting in a chair. Tape covered his mouth and his limbs were tied to the seat. It was the same image as the one in the photo.

‘Don’t do unto others what you don’t want. Didn’t you learn that from your school teacher?’

Someone was speaking. However, their voice was distorted. The machine-like voice continued. ‘After hitting them with several punches and weakening them, you cut their tail and crush both eyes. That’s what you did to that cat. The poor cat. It suffered dearly.’

They had mentioned a cat. *What on earth was this about?*

What would happen next? Sanjou and his underlyings surrounded the computer and watched the screen intently.

‘We’ll have you get a taste of the exact same pain from here on out.’

The footage switched between clips for a while. The high school student was being tortured.

“.....What the hell is this?” One of Sanjou’s subordinates exclaimed unintentionally. “Are we turning to using videos from a Snuff film?”

“No,” Sanjou replied. “This is president Yamazaki’s grandson.”

“Eh?” The subordinate became speechless.

They heard screams that made them wanted to cover their ears coming from the computer. The high school boy in the center of the scream – Shota Yamazaki – was having his eyes crushed at this point.

‘Won’t you turn towards the camera and say sorry?’

‘I-I’m so-rry.’ Shota desperately pleaded for forgiveness as the blade of the knife cut his eyes, blood and tears splattered on his face. ‘I won’t do it, I won’t do it anymore. Please forgive me. Please save me.’

‘Do you understand the feelings of the cat you killed that time?’

Even as he apologized, the torturer did not stop. Shota Yamazaki was then decapitated, dying on screen.

The next moment, the footage turned pitch black. Once the characters, 'you're next' appeared in a blood red font, the video ended.

I see, Sanjou groaned. There was a lot of things that he understood now from the video. "President Yamazaki's grandson killed numerous cats. He had filmed their torture and uploaded them onto a website."

Kunio Yamazaki's words appeared to his mind.

'Shota was not as good as we thought he was.'

It was exactly so. Shota Yamazaki was a cruel high schooler who took pleasure in tormenting animals.

"After he disappeared, the website was altered. Someone uploaded the video I just showed you on this page."

"Then what does it mean by, 'you're next?'"

"There are other guys who have the hobby of tormenting animals on this site as well. It was probably a warning for them. 'Anyone who does tortures animals this way will meet the same fate.'"

Someone had tortured Shota and uploaded the video onto the site after tampering with the website. They also probably threatened Shota to write the note which stated he was running away from home.

There must have been someone else besides the ones who kidnapped Shota and tortured him who had the ability to tamper the website. There could be even more people involved in this case, but for now they needed to find the ringleader.

"President Yamazaki tasked us to find out who could have done that to his grandson. Any one of you got any ideas?"

After Sanjou looked at his lackey's faces, there was one among them who spoke up. ".....Ah, perhaps-"

"What is it, Kase?" Sanjou prompted. "Tell me."

“Perhaps it was the work of an avenger.”

“An avenger?”

“It said it in the video right? That they’ll have him get a taste of the exact same pain. That clicked with me. I had heard rumors of a group called the avengers which would put others through the same pain as they did to others before.”

“.....Avengers, then.” Sanjou groaned. If it was the work of an avenger, what happened in that video would make sense.

Shota Yamazaki had killed cats. And someone who had their beloved cat killed by Shota went to the avengers.

Sanjou replayed the video uploaded on Shota’s website one more time. He paid close attention to what the person said.

‘After hitting them with several punches and weakening them, you cut their tail and crush both eyes.’

‘We’ll have you get a taste of the exact same pain from here on out.’

‘Won’t you turn towards the camera and say sorry?’

‘Do you understand the feelings of the cat you killed that time?’

The footage was definitely an avenger’s work. At first Sanjou suspected it was an act done by an extreme animal welfare group, imitating what a terrorist would do. If it was, the mention of one single cat was out of place. When he considered it to be the revenge for a pet cat, then it made more sense.

“Avengers, huh.” Sanjou nodded in understanding. “What else? Where could you meet an avenger?”

“It seems you have to be referred to them,” Kase answered. “They don’t tell someone where to meet them unless you were a client.”

“Could we try to find their location through an info broker?” Another lackey spoke up.

“No, there’s a faster way to do it.” Kase reached for the computer. “Please allow me to use this.”

“What do you plan on doing?”

“There’s an underground website which gathers information on the underground industry. I’m going to ask about the avengers there.”

Kase connected to the internet and pulled up the website Undergroundjobs, Fukuoka version. He began typing a post into the forum. The subject was ‘Requesting Information on the Avengers.’ Sanjou said to his subordinate when he got that far. “Hold on.”

“Yes?”

“There’s the chance this would be found suspicious. Let’s pretend to be a client. Change it to, ‘Please introduce us to an avenger.’”

“Understood,” Kase nodded and began typing on the keyboard.

“I’ll have the text be: ‘We’re looking for the avengers. We have someone we despise that we want to make even with. We will pay a reward for anyone that can refer us to them.’ How does this sound?”

“That’s fine.”

If they had to be referred, it would be tough if it was just spread by word of mouth. They should easily be able to make contact with them if there was anyone in it for the money. They wrote a disposable e-mail address as a form of contact.

They finished their preparations.

“Sorry I called all you guys here on sudden notice. You can go back now.”

After he dismissed his subordinates, Sanjou called out to one to stay, “that’s right; Ishihara.”

A man with an unshaved beard turned around, giving him a sour look. “Yes?”

He had Ishihara in charge of the new project. “It’s about that case, but you do have enough, right?”

“There is no issue.” Ishihara answered. “I should have the designated number we need by the fixed date.”

“I see. Glad to hear that.”

Their due date was in three days. They did not have much time left.

“.....By the way,” Sanjou suddenly recalled. “Did you know that guys from the Noma Group were killed the other day?”

“Yes,” Ishihara nodded. “I saw it on the news.”

Their group and the Mutagawa Group had nothing but quarrels between them in the past. If others were too quick to assume it was them who had killed the men, someone may attempt to take revenge on them. Furthermore, it was also possible that the culprit who attacked the Noma Group would make an attack on the Mutagawa Group, as they also were involved in the drug dealing business.

“You better be careful. There could be someone trying to interfere on the trade.”

“I suppose,” Ishihara nodded. His biggest defect was that he was quick to lose his temper, but he was a useful subordinate.

“I don’t know who was behind that, but they caused us unnecessary trouble.” *And at such a busy time for them*, Sanjou tutted.



There was a room surrounded by diamond-patterned wall paper in a bright red RV with plush toys and dolls situated on a sofa, staring intently in the direction of the boy. The visitor finally awoke, sprawled out on the sofa. He glanced around his surroundings fearfully, his anxiety showing on his face. “Where am I.....?”

“This is our home.”

A clown replied to him, peeking at his guest’s face.

“Where’s mama?”

“No mama. Méqué’s mama died. She’s no longer here.”

“No, my mama. Where’s my mama?”

“Méqué doesn’t know. Ahaha.”

The clown chuckled.

“But come on, play with us.” He drew closer to his guest. “Be that one’s friend.”

His guest frowned at his request. “I want to go home.”

“No, you can’t.” The clown had no intention on letting him go home. “Here, watch Méqué.”

The clown took out his tools from the trunk. They were clubs – a type of street performing prop. They were heavier than standard ones, being made of metal. The clown improved his arm strength by practicing with these since a young age.

He maneuvered the three clubs skillfully, showing off his juggling abilities. “Look, look. Isn’t this neat?”

However, his guest would not even look. He just repeated, “I want to see mama.”

In the end he covered his face with both hands and started crying. “Mamaaa.....”

The small child repeatedly called for his mother and sobbed.

“.....You’re annoying.”

The clown muttered.

He dropped the clubs to the ground, making a loud sound. He then leapt at the child in front of him with a speed like an animal would make when hunting its prey. “Annoying, annoying, annoying!”

When he got on the him, the child wailed even louder.

“Méqué said you’re annoying.” The clown covered the child’s small mouth with his palm. “Shut up.”

Unable to breath, the child began struggling. But the clown paid no heed to his pain and kept his mouth closed forcefully.

At that moment, there was a sudden, high-pitched electronic ring. It was an

alert for an incoming message. The clown released his hand off the child's mouth and went to check his cell phone. It seemed the data he asked for had arrived.

The child was motionless. He thought the boy had died, but he was still breathing. He seemed to have just lost consciousness. But the clown had enough. He did not need a child that did not want to be friends with that one.

Once the clown opened the RV's door, he tossed the child out onto an open area of land. He looked at the small body fallen onto the grass before returning to his room. He then turned on his favorite music he always listened to. It was *Vesti la Giubba* – an opera Pagliacci. It was a piece of music he had to listen to before heading out.

Vesti la giubba, (Put on the costume)

E la faccia infarina. (and the face in white powder)

A male's singing voice resounded throughout the small room. The clown read through the data that was sent to him while listening to the tune. The name he saw on the first page was Mari Aikawa.

Mari Aikawa. Her address was in the Hakata ward in Fukuoka City.

He read over the report and packed the information on his target in his head.

Ridi, Pagliaccio... (Laugh, Pagliaccio)

E ognuno applaudirà! (and everyone will applaud!)

That's right; everyone will applaud.

His heartbeat raced. His blood boiled.

Tramuta in lazzi lo spasmo ed il pianto; (Change into laughs the spasms of pain;)

In una smorfia il singhiozzo e'l dolor... (into the grimace of tears of pain...)

It was time to head out.

The clown moved to the driver's seat and gripped the wheel.

Ridi, Pagliaccio, (Laugh, Pagliaccio)

Sul tuo amore infranto! (for your love is broken!)

Ridi del duol che t'avvelena il cor! (Laugh of the pain that poisons your heart!)

He was going to save this world now – this poisoned world.

The clown stepped on the acceleration pedal while humming the melody of the tune.



She did not hear back from the detective. They still had not found her daughter. But Mari Aikawa was calm. She even thought to herself that she would not mind if they never find her. That girl was originally not hers to begin with. She was not her daughter. She was the daughter of that woman – that annoying ex-wife of her husband.

Rena was just a hindrance. Every time she looked at the money that disappeared for her as part of her child-rearing expenses, she thought it would be better if that child was gone. If it were not for her, she could use that money for her real child, Arisu. Mari could have had her adorable child take lessons or go to cramming school, whatever she would like to her heart's content.

Mari looked at the clock. It was about time for her daughter to get back from school. Since they had to come back in a group, it was taking her daughter a little longer than usual to return.

Just then, there was a noise coming from the entrance.

Her daughter must have come home. After a few moments, the door to the living room opened.

“Welcome back, Arisu-”

When Mari Aikawa looked up towards that direction, she froze.

That was not her daughter.

It was a man.

He was abnormal, dressed in an outlandish clown outfit.

Mari's eyes widened seeing the sudden intruder. Fear rushed through her body, and she yelped.

She was unable to raise her voice well enough to cry for help.

The clown approached her while humming a tune. Mari quickly dashed for the kitchen in haste.

"Wh-who are you?" She immediately picked up a kitchen knife nearby. She held the object with shaking hands and pointed the tip at the man. "D-don't come any closer!"

But the man did not stop.

The man held something in his hands. He was twirling it around, broadly grinning at her as he drew closer. The man dodged Mari's attack when she swung the kitchen knife and laughed cheerfully, "ahaha." As though he was playing around.

The next moment, a blunt object he threw struck Mari beside the head. Her vision wavered from the impact and the sharp pain. Mari fell on the spot.

The clown did not relent. He swung the object own multiple times. Mari heard dull sounds. Each time it was swung, her body jerked.

A lukewarm liquid poured down her face, accompanied by the sensation of her head splitting – it was blood.

Translation Notes:

- *Vesti la guibba* is an aria piece in the Italian opera *I Pagliacci*. The piece is about one of the characters singing about how he has to put on a cheerful face for the world despite being heart broken and going through his own troubles.

The Italian lyrics were provided in the novel itself with a Japanese translation, but I looked up the Italian to English translation instead. It makes more sense for me to do direct translations, but I don't know Italian well enough to attempt it and Italian > Japanese > English wasn't ideal, so I looked elsewhere for Italian > English. I took the lines from [here](#). If anyone knows Italian, feel free to correct me.

- The clown, Méqué, speaks in a very child-like manner in Japanese. What is especially unique that doesn't translate over is that all his lines are written in kana only – *no kanji*. To put it in perspective, even the child he was talking to had his lines in Kanji, and Misaki's lines have kanji. So having the character's lines in only kana is very unsettling and allows a glimpse into his mental state in just how detached he is and how emotionally stunted he is.

He also talks in first person, using his name. This isn't really uncommon for children to refer to themselves with their name instead of first person pronouns. In fact, in my experience, I had some female classmates in high school who spoke in this manner and it was acceptable. Since it's not common in English, usually I substitute the name for the "I/me" pronouns, but here I felt it was better and more eerie to have Méqué keep referring to himself with his own name, especially since the kana-only usage can't be fully brought over.

Fourth Inning

Top of the Fourth Inning

It seemed like the time needed to find the child would take a while. Lin got out of bed earlier than usual and washed up. Banba was already dressed.

“.....I’m hungry.”

Lin said while stifling a yawn. “Should I make some ramen?” Banba asked, heading to the sink. He was going to take out cup ramen from the cupboard.

“No, I feel like having rice today.” They had been having nothing but ramen recently, so Lin wanted to have something different once in awhile. “You still got mentaiko left, right?”

The rice cooker was empty. Banba consented although he made a slightly annoyed face when Lin chose an option that would take some time. “.....Fine.”

After a few moments, Lin heard the sound of the rice being washed. He turned on the TV, deciding to watch the news program for a bit while Banba was preparing the rice. The latest event was being reported. ‘Mari Aikawa-san – a housewife living in the Hakata ward was found dead in her own home by her youngest daughter when she came home from-’

Lin immediately came alert, his eyes widening. “.....You serious?”

It was their client from the night before. The photo of the woman shown on the television was without a doubt that mother they met.

“Hey, Banba.” Lin quickly called out to Banba who was standing in front of the sink. “Banba!”

“Wait another second, I’m washin’ them right now.”

“The rice doesn’t matter! Look at this!” Lin yelled, pointing to the television screen.

Banba walked over while drying off his soaked hands. “Ah,” he muttered when he saw the news.

“That woman was murdered.”

They could not eat food nonchalantly at the moment. Lin and Banba looked at each other and immediately ran out of the office.

“How come you guys get nothing but troublesome clients?” Enokida, having heard the full story from the two, said more cheerfully than usual. “You got real catchers at your home.”

Banba muttered with an annoyed expression. “.....I wanna know too.”

Lin and Banba had headed straight to Nakasu once they left the office. Enokida was in his usual cafe. They approached him as he was having his snack and brought up the unexpected developments involving their client.

“So how did your end go?” Lin asked him. “Did you find out anything?”

Enokida was tasked to find information on Mari Aikawa. He looked at his computer screen and read his results. “I looked into her, but Mari Aikawa was just an ordinary person.”

“Really?”

“I looked back a few decades, and she has zero connections to the underground.”

But Enokida then clarified.

“However, this woman was taken under the CFWS.”

“The CFWS?”

“Child and Family Welfare Services. Someone reported her for abusing her daughter. This is the report here.”

Banba and Lin looked at the piece of paper handed to them simultaneously.

“A neighbor reported hearing a hysterical yell and a child crying. When the personnel went to visit the household, they found the eldest daughter Rena with a huge bruise on her cheek. The mother proclaimed that her daughter fell over and crashed into something during her interview, and Rena-chan also covered for her mother, so the CFWS wasn’t able to take action. In the end, they had to release the mother from the establishment.”

“I see.” Banba groaned. “That’s why she didn’t report to the police.”

The reason why Mari Aikawa did not report to the police and reached out to a private detective instead was that. It had intrigued them, but now it was clear as day.

She was afraid of being found out for abusing her daughter.

“Then do you think her daughter disappearing was a ruse?”

Maybe she had gone too far and accidentally killed her daughter. The possibility that she disposed of the body and attempted to showcase it as a disappearance was there.

“Perhaps,” Enokida snorted. “Well, we won’t know unless we ask the person herself.”

The sole person who knew was no longer in this world.

“Do you know who killed Mari Aikawa?”

Lin was wondered if this man had found other information on her.

“Look at this.”

Enokida told them, moving the computer screen to face them. An image of the crime scene was displayed on it. A woman, dripping in blood, was hung upside down.

“This is Mari Aikawa’s body. Shigematsu-san sent this to me discreetly. This is quite intriguing.”

Enokida hit a key, enlarging the image to the close up of the victim’s face.

“What the heck is that.....?” Lin’s eyes widened.

There was paint on the body’s face. There were heart shapes on both of its cheeks. They were crooked, as though a child drew them.

“The culprit drew these on the body’s face. With the victim’s own blood.”

“Why would they do that?” Lin found it incomprehensible. He tilted his head in confusion.

“Perhaps it is his signature.”

“.....His signature?”

“He leaves a sign on the body or at the scene to indicate it was him that killed them. There are only two types of people who would do this: a psychopath or-”

“A hitman.”

When Banba whispered that, Enokida nodded in agreement, “yes. There were those murders of the yakuza guys from Noma Group a few days ago, right?” Enokida put up a different image on the screen. “This is a photo of that crime scene. They were attacked while they were in the middle of carrying out a drug exchange.”

“.....They’re the same.” Lin whispered, looking at the photo.

There were three bodies of men there. They were killed in the same manner Mari Arikawa was. They bled out and were hung upside down. That was not all. They had the same marks on their faces.

“Indeed. You can see the victims in this case have the same signature.”

“What’s the chance of it being an impersonator?”

“Unlikely. The details on how they were hung upside down and that they had marks on their face was not released to the media.”

No one else could imitate that style. Unless the culprit was among the investigators.

“When I looked further into it, I found a lot of other cases just like these that happened in the past. Drug dealers handling the trade of drugs like the Noma Group did were killed in the same fashion. Although, since these helped eliminate harmful insects that flooded the populace with drugs, the police just treated it like a conflict between other gangs and let the cases off the hook like that.”

However, Lin could not see a connection between those cases and this one. Banba also tilted his head in confusion. “Fellas who handle drugs and a mother who abuses her child.....The two targets are completely different.”

“Exactly.” Enokida exclaimed. “A serial killer psychopath just targeted a certain category of people.”

If someone preferred blondes, then they would only target blonde women. If someone resented large men, then they would only target large men. If the culprit was a psychopath, then they should have similar targets.

However, the victims for the two examples differed.

“So then it was the work of a hitman?”

“That would be the appropriate assumption.” Enokida replied ambiguously.
“But I feel it’s a bit different.”

Banba examined Enokida’s face closely at that.

“.....Enokida-kun,” he narrowed his eyes, suspicious. “Do ya know somethin’?”

“Eh?” Enokida played dumb. “What do you mean?”

“Dontcha try to hide it.”

Enokida relented when Banba pressed him for an answer with a stern voice.
“I’m not match for you, Banba-san.”

He had no intention of hiding it now. Enokida chuckled untimidly.

“Truth is, it was my fault that Mari Aikawa got murdered.”

“Ha?” Lin frowned at his unexpected statement. “What do you mean by that?”

“This man who was killed,” Enokida pointed to one of the three bodies in the photo. “He was a client of mine. I would often give him information, and yesterday I got a job from him. He said he wanted information on abusive parents. But he was already dead by the time that message was sent.”

Getting a job from a dead man was beyond peculiar.

“So the culprit pretended to be this man and asked you to do that?”

“Probably. And I even sent them those CFWS reports. The information on Mari Aikawa and her daughter was among them. And now the other day, Mari Aikawa was found dead.”

‘It is my fault that Mari Aikawa got murdered.’ Enokida was not wrong when he said that. It was difficult to consider the person who asked Enokida for

information and the person who murdered Mari Aikawa as different people. Enokida's information had lead that woman to death.

I hope Enokida didn't have over that information while aware they were a fake. Lin could not help but think that. There was no way that this sharp man did not see through the imposter.

"Can you find the culprit's location with your hacking skills?"

"I tried, but they already discarded the cell phone. I was a step too slow. Here, this is the newest case." Enokida took out his smartphone and showed the screen to the two. An article on a murder case that happened in Fukuoka was shown on a news website on the internet. The name of the victim was Ryouji Aoyama. He was a company employee, age thirty-two. "This man was also taken under CFWS for abusing his son."

This murder case had the same objective as Aikawa's.

"So you're saying you left the culprit fodder?" Lin grimaced. "How many reports on people did you send to them?"

"Thirty people altogether."

Having said that, Enokida placed a stack of papers down onto the table; it was the information on abuse he had collected.

They glanced through the data. Mari Aikawa, Ryouji Aoyama, Hiroshi Ishihara, Kazumi Ueda. Lin sighed as he looked at the thirty names of parents on the list. "Because of you, thirty people will be sacrificed. You better reflect on that."

"I do know it was wrong of me to do, you know?" Enokida told him, smiling.

Liar, Lin muttered in his mind. As if this guy would reflect on anything he does.

"Hey, do you know of *benitsuchikamemushi*?"

Lin cocked his head at Enokida's abrupt question. "No idea. Where are you going with this?"

"*Benitsuchikamemushi* are bugs that raise children. They'll bring food and provide for their own children. Don't you think that's cool?" Enokida glanced at the stack of data files and stated ironically. "I find it ridiculous that those bugs could raise children right, but people like these won't even feed their child

properly and would just lash out at them violently instead. I don't imagine anyone would be sad when these parents – the worst of the worst – die."

He was not reflecting on his actions at all.

After Lin had glared at the defiant information with a side glance, Banba, who had remained silent the whole time, spoke. ".....What do ya reckon' the culprit's objective is?"

He considered they were going around and killing anyone involved in purchasing and selling drugs, but now they were targeting child abusers. He had the impression that the person was killing selected groups indiscriminately now. He could not figure out the culprit's motive. However, he could say one thing for certain. Whether the person behind these acts was a hitman, a psychopath, or a serial killer, they certainly could not be stopped anytime soon.

"What's the possibility that the person who killed Mari Aikawa is the same as the one who abducted her child?"

"Impossible. The daughter was taken before I provided the information to the guy."

Banba hoped they could get some sort of lead if Rena Aikawa's disappearance was linked to the murder of her mother, but there was not.

"So what are you two going to do now?" Enokida asked. "Your client is dead, so there's no more need for you two to get involved in the case, right?"

"Since a child is missin', we can't overlook that."

"She's probably already been killed."

".....You're merciless."

"Even if you managed to save her by some chance, she's going to have some emotional scars for the rest of her life."

Enokida whispered as he looked at the photo of Mari's body.

"Did you know? There's more than 60,000 cases of child abuse reported every year? It's only been on the rise since 1990. And if you factor in the number of crimes committed, then they're even more absurd."

Only a small portion of children among those numbers would make the news and made public. Many children in Japan lived their lives while being tormented by their guardians because the populace was unaware.

“This country is sick.” They did not hear the usual joke in Enokida’s words. “From drugs to abuse.....I can get this guy’s desire to kill people like that.”



They were not as frequent as before, but there were occasions the past would come to her mind. Sometimes it would be when she was watching TV, when she was just about to go to bed, or when she laid between the blankets. Or even like today, when she became lost in thought at school. For an abrupt moment, the memories of her past flickered by in her mind.

Even as she looked at the blackboard, resting her chin in her hand, the scenes from a few years ago would appear before her.

That man was the worst.

She wished he would die.

What did her mother like in a man like him?

Misaki could not help but wonder to herself.

Her new father who her mother brought into their family hardly worked and spent every day in pinball parlors and mahjong clubs. Whenever her mother would try to confront him about it, her step-father would go into a rage. ‘Shut up, you damn woman! Acting like you’re all high and mighty and shit!’ He hit her mother as he said those words.

Her step-father’s violence grew worse and worse by the day. Whenever he was in a foul mood, he would even hit the then four year-old Misaki. Whenever her mother would try to advice him, he would take offense to it and strike her.

Misaki hated that home. She felt awful being there.

She despised meal times even more.

‘The food is shit.’ ‘The miso soup is cold.’ ‘You make nothing but the things I hate.’ Her step-father jeered every time they sat down for dinner. Misaki always

ate her food quietly, as not to incur his wrath. Whenever she made even a little bit of noise, he would go into a rage, yelling at her that she had ate disgustingly, spitting saliva or grains of rice at her face. And even when she was eating properly, he would hound her like a delinquent would in a fight, saying, 'I don't like how you're eating,' or, 'you're making fun of adults.'

Everyday she would unhinge her unreasonable father in some way. There was nothing a four year-old could do. She had no way or ability to fight back; she could only wait for the storm to pass.

How long would this hell continue on for? Misaki would pray for her father to calm down as quickly as possible as she watched her mother being repeatedly beaten by him.

Then one day, her mother disappeared. She had runaway, leaving Misaki behind.

Now her mother would not get beaten up anymore. She should be glad. But instead, a hollowing feeling of loss and despair clamoured in her heart.

She had been abandoned.

Even though she had considered her mother to be her sole protector.

Living with the man was miserable. Misaki was not even able to go to kindergarten, so she remained only at the house. She would dig through the refrigerator for food while the man was out at pinball parlors and watched educational TV programs and dramas so she would not forget words.

She was always hungry and was not properly clean. She was in a terrible environment, but it did not end there. The hell only grew worse. When the woman ran away, that man had went into a fit of anger. He drowned himself in even more alcohol and lashed out more frequently than before. And all he had to let out his stress on was Misaki.

When night fell, the man would coerce Misaki to pour him his drinks. He would order the four year-old girl to hold the heavy bottle and pour it for him. If she spilled any at all or did not pour enough for him, the man would scold her in a large voice and smack her upside the head. The level of violence gradually escalated as the man would strike at Misaki daily, finding a fault even in the

most trivial of actions. He did this in place of her mother. And Misaki continued to hold up against it. She always braced herself, tense, expecting to be attacked at any time.

One time, Misaki was kicked in the stomach and because her arm was held up in a twist her right arm and ribs broke. The man had taken Misaki to a hospital and told the doctor that she got those injuries in a fight with a friend. The man was worried that the doctor would still suspect him of abuse. So since then, he had changed tactics.

‘Hey, come here.’

The man called for Misaki at nightfall. He thrust a bottle of Japanese sake, holding a cigarette in his mouth as he lit it, and ordered, ‘pour it.’

Misaki gripped the sho bottle with her tiny hands. She tried adding strength to hold it, but her arm shook from the weight. Unable to pour the drink into the narrow glass, she spilled the alcohol onto the man’s hand.

“What the hell are you doing?! You stupid kid!”

The man yelled at Misaki as usual and grabbed her arm. He pushed her to the ground and got on top of her so she could not escape, restraining her. The man rolled up her clothes. He picked up the burnt cigarette and pressed the tip against Misaki’s back.

A scream fell from her lips.

It burns.

It hurts.

I’m scared.

The man laughed above her as she wailed, pressing the cigarette repeatedly into her back. Every time he did she would hear the crisp sound of flesh burning, and there was a sharp pain that shot through her.

Misaki lost control of her bladder from the immense fear and pain. “You dare piss yourself? You’re disgusting.” The man swore at her. While the man moved back away from her, Misaki rushed into the closet to hide.

“Hey, come out ‘ere!”

The man's yelling drew closer. The man sounded more menacing than ever before.

She thought he would kill her. She could not stop shaking.

"I told you to get the hell out of there!"

The man's arm reached out to her and grabbed a hold on her leg. Just when he attempted to drag her out, they heard a cheerful voice, unfitting to the situation going on around them.

"Hii~, good evening."

".....Ahh?" Misaki's step-father let go of her leg and turned around to face the speaker. He was shocked to see a sudden intruder. "Who are you?"

Misaki also observed what was going on outside from the open space to the closet.

"The door was unlocked, so I let myself in." An unfamiliar man stood inside the room. Even though he was a man, he spoke femininely. "Oh my, it reeks of alcohol in here."

"Who the hell are you?!" Her step-father raised his voice.

"I'm an avenger."

Ah-ven-ger?

The young Misaki had no idea who this man was. She was unsure whether he was an ally or an enemy.

The avenger went on to explain to the dumbfounded man, "I got a job request from your wife. She told me she wanted me to avenge her by beating you up endlessly."

The avenger then grabbed the man by his collar and punched him in the face. He made more punches, over and over again.

Misaki watched the scene unfold in front of her silently.

The man who had always lashed out at her mother so arrogantly was now being beaten up. His face swelled up, blood dripping from his mouth. He pleaded for mercy while crying out in pain pathetically.

After a while, the man lost consciousness.

“.....What’s this?”

The avenger had noticed her presence. His eyes were wide in surprise.

He found me!

Misaki braced herself.

“Come on out,” the avenger held out his hand to her. “It’s alright; I won’t do anything to you.”

He had a gentle smile.

Misaki fearfully grabbed that hand. The avenger padded her head gently once she got out of the closet. “You’re okay now. You did well.”

He had large, warm hands.

“.....Avenger-san.” Misaki looked up at him with a tear-stricken face. “Thank you for taking down dad.”

Bottom of the Fourth Inning

Researching into the avengers was proceeding well. A certain man saw the post on Undergroundjobs and gave them their contact information. From what Sanjou’s lackey told him, the person who provided them the information had contacted an avenger for a job a few months prior and had been introduced to the avenger via someone else’s recommendation. He had contacted the avenger and met with him in a restaurant in the city. The man was around his thirties, tall, and gentle-mannered.

‘Capture the avenger and make him acknowledge the brutal acts he did to Shota Yamazaki.’ Those were the orders Sanjou received. He was allowed to be a bit rough with him, but he could not take his life. The client that was the Yamazaki household had the right to decide the avenger’s fate.

Sanjou’s lackeys, including Ishara, contacted the man. Both sides used e-mail addresses that could be discarded, but they had safely set up an appointment to meet directly. They would meet with him at nine in the afternoon. The location would be at a bar in Nakasu called the Smokin hot.

When Ishihara got into the car and left home, he picked up a man younger than him named Kase at the office. Kase got into the passenger's seat, and they headed for Nakasu.

"What's wrong, Ishihara-san?" Kase addressed Ishihara, who was looking in the rearview mirror wearilly.

".....I feel like that vehicle is following us."

He once again looked at the mirror. A few cars behind them, there was a bright red RV trailing behind them. He saw that car since he had left home.

"Which one?"

"The red one."

Kase turned around to check for the car in question.

"As if anyone would tail us in a conspicuous car like that." He chuckled.

It was as he said. It was too obvious for someone to be tailing them. "Well, just in case maybe I should shake them off."

Ishihara turned the wheel sharply. They had more than enough time until their meeting. There was no issue in taking a little roundabout way to get there.

Fifth Inning

Top of the Fifth Inning

Misaki, having just got under Jiro's protection, was in a terrible state. It was as though she had not had a bath in days. The clothes she wore had not even been put in the wash as they were slightly dirty, and she had a sour scent to her as well.

At any rate, Jiro had to get her clean.

"How about you go in the bath first?"

She had been utterly silent the entire ride home. She still was. She would not reply even when Jiro addressed her. She would just nod wordlessly.

"Can you take off your clothes by yourself?"

She raised her arms in an attempt to get her clothes off of her when she suddenly stilled. She had grimaced for an instant, indicating that she was probably hurt somewhere on her body. She shook her head left and right silently.

".....Your arm is injured, isn't it?" He had planned on tossing the dirty clothes anyway. "How about I cut them off?"

She nodded.

Jiro placed the scissors into her clothes and cut from the back down and picked up the pieces of cloth afterwards before looking her over. She had numerous bruises all across her upper body. They varied from brand new bluish ones to old black ones. They were proof that she had been abused for a long period of time. And then there were a couple of burnt marks along her back. The wounds looked like they were from the butt of a cigarette being pressed into her back.

This is awful, Jiro whispered to himself in his mind. Why did such a young girl like her have to receive such brutal treatment?

As to not aggravate the wounds, he gently wiped her torso with a moist

towel. She obediently let it happen. He let her lower half which had fewer injuries he cleaned from the shower spray.

He put on new underwear and clothes he had bought for her on their way home. She let him and merely watched the process like an emotionless doll.

“Alright, next. Let’s wash your hair.”

He began to carefully knead her lackluster, tangled hair with shampoo, making sure that it did not drip onto her clothes or onto her wounds.

“I was a beauty artist. I’m good, right?”

She nodded wordlessly again when he smiled at her.

After he had gotten her clean, he then brought Misaki to Saeki’s place. Once Saeki finished treating her wounds, Jiro then brought her to a family restaurant.

“You’re hungry, right? Go ahead and eat whatever you like.” He told Misaki, pointing to the front of the menu.

She took it in hand, and after looking through it intently she muttered, “omelette rice.”

Jiro called for a shop attendee and ordered her an omelette rice and orange juice and a coffee for himself. After a few minutes had passed, their items were brought to their table. She ate elegantly, cutting up her food into tiny portions with her spoon and carefully bringing them to her mouth.

“Eat however you like. No one will get mad at you if you don’t do proper manners.”

The moment Jiro said that, she began to stuff her face full of food with great vigorousness. She must have been starving.

Her plate was empty in mere minutes.

“Can you still eat?”

Misaki nodded.

“What would you like?” He handed her the menu again.

After thinking for a few moments, Misaki answered, “a hamburger, a Dorian casserole, and a chocolate banana parfait.”

Can she eat that much? Jiro was awestruck. He did not mind having her eat whatever she liked, but he was unsure how her small stomach could take in that much food.

Jiro suddenly realized as he drank his coffee. *That reminds me, I believe professionals said on a documentary program about abused children I saw in the past that those victimized children would eat to the point they would throw up. Because they were not provided with enough food with their parents giving up on raising them, they developed this way of thinking: 'if I don't eat when I can, who knows when the next time I can eat will be.'*

Perhaps she thought the same too.

"You can eat tomorrow too, so you don't have to force yourself."

He said, testing the water. She instantly looked up at him and questioned.
".....Really?"

"Yes, really."

".....I can eat tomorrow too?"

"You can eat as much as you want. You're my child now."

Misaki made a shocked expression at Jiro's statement. She then stared at the menu for a while and adjusted her order.".....A chocolate banana parfait."

Misaki had the standard attachment disorder as seen in other abused children, unable to warm up to others. It could be that she was just bad getting along with people, but she was always expressionless, making it difficult to tell what she was thinking. But now she just started to open up. It was a huge step forward for her.

Because of her tragic upbringing, she was never able to be given anything until now. As such, Jiro wanted to grant her desires as much as he could.

But this he would not waver on.

"No."

Misaki pouted when he turned her down. "Why?"

"Because it's dangerous."

Jiro had a sudden job request and had to meet with his client. And Misaki had been whining to take her with him.

This had been happening more often as of late. Misaki would want to go along with Jiro whenever he got a job for his underground business.

Naturally, he could not let her go. He swore to himself that he would never let her be involved with his avenger work again.

“Take care of the house, alright?”

Jiro left their home, leaving the sullen Misaki behind.



After talking with Enokida, Lin and Banba left and spent the rest of the day questioning people around the park. But in the end, they got no result. The most they got was unhelpful rumors and gossip from a talkative couple that lived in the apartment building there: that the wife of a couple in room 105 committed adultery, that Hashimoto-san in room 304 had been downsizing, and that the father of the Ishihara household in room 408 seemed to be a yakuza in the Mutagawa Group. They did not find any beneficial witness testimonies. Rena's whereabouts was still a mystery.

“This sure is odd,” Lin cocked his head in thought when they returned to the office.

It was not as though there was a lack of passerby near the park that day around that time that Rena had disappeared. If someone was wandering around that area, looking for a child, someone should have some recollection of that. “Is that what people call disappearing into thin air?”

“Maybe she was kidnapped by an unsuspicious-lookin’ fella.” Banba suggested as he poured water into the cup ramen.

“.....Unsuspicious-looking?”

He mentioned the first thing he thought of, imagining someone who could pass by without looking suspicious when with a young girl.

“Like someone in a police uniform?”

A uniform had authority to it. People would have faith in anyone who wore a uniform. Especially if they were a police officer.

“Or maybe a woman around the same age as her mother.”

Everyone’s first thought when they see a woman and child together would be that of a mother and daughter.

“And then maybe.....another child?”

If it was another kid, then that would not be suspicious. No one would suspect a child playing with her at the park to be the kidnapper. A child kidnapping a child?

“.....There’s no way.”

The moment he laughed at the thought, the door to the office opened.

Lin and Banba’s eyes widened when they saw their sudden guest.

It was Misaki.

“Misaki,” Banba asked her while gesturing her to come in. “Whatcha doin’ here at this hour?”

It was rare for her to drop by this place. And her caretaker was not here with her either.

“Where’s Jiro?”

“At work. Doing avenger stuff.” Misaki replied, looking up at Banba’s face.
“Can I stay here for today?”

“Huh? Why?” Lin scowled.

“I’ve ran away from home.”

“Ran away?”

“Yeah. So please let me stay here.”

Out of all the things to say.

“This isn’t joke. We’re not an orphanage.” Lin objected. She should just hurry on back home. Jiro will be worried about her too.

“I didn’t ask you.” Misaki glared at Lin. “I’m asking Zen-chan.”

What a brat, Lin grimaced.

“Hold on there. I don’t mind ya stayin’.” Banba crouched down and looked Misaki in the eye. “Could ya tell me why you ran away from home?”

Misaki nodded earnestly, moved by Banba’s kind disposition.

She took a seat on the sofa, Banba sitting down next to her.

“.....Jiro-chan won’t bring me along for his work. He says he can’t because it’s dangerous.”

According to her, she kept telling Jiro that she wanted to go with him to meet his client, but he would not let her. Annoyed, she wrote a note, ‘I’m leaving home. Please don’t look for me.’ She had then left their house and came here.

“Hey, Zen-chan.”

“Hm?”

“I have another favor to ask you.”

“What is it now?”

“Teach me how to kill people.”

“.....Ha?” Banba was at a loss of words at her unexpected request. “No, sorry. I can’t do that.”

However, Misaki would not back down. “It’s fine. Teach me. I want to become a killer too. So please. Even one week of it will do.”

“Are you stupid? That’s not something you can pick up.” Lin frowned. “Are you making light of hitmen?”

“I’m not.”

“Misaki,” Banba said to admonish her. “A hitman ain’t something you become by wanting to be. People become killers because that’s the only thing they can become.”

“.....I don’t get it.”

Misaki pouted.

Lin could not go along with the kid’s selfishness. He sighed. “No matter what

you try to do, Jiro isn't going to have you tag along."

Jiro would not have Misaki help him with his work, no matter if she tried to run away from home or underwent training to learn how to kill people.

"Why?" Misaki was sullen.

"Isn't it obvious? Because a kid will only be a burden."

Lin stated bluntly. Banba hastily tried to make a follow-up. "That ain't it. Jiro cares for you, so he's worried—"

"I'm not a kid!" Misaki cut Banba off and yelled. "I won't be a burden!"

"How?" Lin looked at her head to toe and snorted. "You can't do a damn thing by yourself."

"I can!"

Misaki rebuked, seething.

"Come on now, you two."

Banba chimed in, attempting to get in between them.

"Ahh, is that the case?" Lin replied back provocatively. "Then how about you do something yourself instead of sitting here and complain?"

At that, Misaki's face turned bright red, and she rushed out of the office. The door slammed with immense force, resounding loudly throughout the room.

What is up with that kid? Lin shrugged, exasperated.

"Really now?" Banba sighed next to him. "Lin-chan, why did ya say that?"

Lin slumped on the sofa and frowned deeply. "Was I wrong?"

"You're pitiful. She's just an elementary school girl."

".....An ignorant kid like her who knows nothing of the world pisses me off." It felt like he was looking at his old self.

Misaki was at the age where she wanted to be included with adults. She had faith that she could do anything, unaware of her powerlessness. Someone had to make her acknowledge that she was in a weak position. If she was aware of it, she would not have been pestering Jiro to take her with him so selfishly. Lin

could not let her say something so foolish as 'I want to become a killer,' despite not knowing what kind of world she was in.

"She has an idea of it in her own way," Banba shrugged and took out his cell phone.



'A burden.'

That word struck right into the most frail portion of Misaki's heart.

Xianming Lin. He's mean, foulmouthed and not nice. I hate him. I don't like a single thing about him.

She got irritated thinking back to him. And her irritation changed over into anxiety.

Would she be abandoned again? Like her mother did back then, when she left her behind in order to get away from her step-father?

Why did she not take Misaki with her?

She knew the answer. It was because she was a burden. It was easier for her to escape by herself. A young child would have just been a deadweight, a hindrance for her getting a new life. Misaki was useless to her mother. She could not do anything, other than needing to be protected. Her mother had gotten more injuries for shielding her.

Misaki had to do something this time. She swore that to herself the day Jiro became her new parent. She would not let herself make the same mistakes. She had to be helpful.

And yet despite her efforts, Jiro would not let her help him with his work recently.

If she was useless, then her existence had no value. At this rate, she would be abandoned again. She had to do something. She was getting more desperate to do so.

While she was briskly walking, anxious, she noticed the cell phone Jiro got her was vibrating. It was an incoming call from Banba.

“.....Hello?”

‘Hello, Misaki?’ She heard Banba’s worried voice. He was always kind, so she liked him. ‘Where’re you plannin’ on goin’? Come back here.’

“I’m going home. I have to feed Kuro anyway.” Kuro was the name of her cat.

‘Ah, I see.’ Banba suddenly sounded relieved. ‘Where are you right now? I can come get you and drop you off.’

“It’s alright. You don’t have to.”

Misaki hung up and then turned the device off. Jiro would not be able to track it if the power was off.

Her saying she was going home was a huge lie. Misaki headed over to Nakasu. She got on the subway and got off at Nakasu Kawabata Station. Once she got passed the fourth exit, she saw the building she was looking for – the Gates Building.

She found the platinum blond head in a cafe on the first floor. It was the Ramens’ lead-off man, the informant Enokida. He had his laptop on the table and was taking a sip of his coffee at the moment.

She took a seat across from him without asking, and Enokida looked over to her and smiled. “This is a rare guest.”

“I have a favor.” Misaki said, leaning forward.

“And what would that be, little avenger-san?”

“Find where Jiro-chan is right now.”

“Why?”

She faltered under his sharp gaze. This man’s eyes were difficult. She felt like he could read all her thoughts. “Just, please.”

“I want to hear the reason.”

“If you won’t find him,” Misaki pointed in the direction of the cafe register and stated, “I’ll tell the employees over there that I’m being dragged around by an unknown man.”

Children being kidnapped was just reported on the news the other day.

Everyone in Fukuoka was frantic over the topic.

As expected, Enokida's complexion changed slightly when she said that. "..... You're a frightening kid to dare threaten me."

"Give me information. I'll pay you if you want money for it."

"I don't think an elementary schooler's allowance will cut it."

Enokida relented almost reluctantly, taking out his smartphone. He seemed to be calling someone.

"You won't find him with your computer?"

"I can hear where he is without having to go out of my way," Enokida glanced over at Misaki and smirked. Shortly after, the recipient picked up his call. "Ah, hello? Jiro-san?"

Misaki was taken aback. The person Enokida called was her caretaker.

Does he plan on ratting me out to Jiro?

Enokida moved forward with the conversation, ignoring the anxious Misaki. "Where are you right now? Ah, you're going to meet with a client? Where at? Ahh, okay.No, there was something I wanted to tell you. I'll call you back later."

Enokida hung up. He could have found out his friend's location on his own, but he did not use hacking to do so.

"Where's Jiro-chan right now?"

"A bar in Nakasu. He's meeting up with a client."

"What's the bar called?"

"Smokin' hot. It's in 3-chome."

"Thank you," Misaki warned Enokida. "Keep this a secret from Jiro-chan, okay?"

"Ah, hold on a second."

She was suddenly grabbed by the arm.

Enokida turned her around and drew close to her face. "You might have to be

careful. This bar is actually-”



Their meeting was at 11:10 pm. Jiro was running late due to unexpected traffic.

Jiro parked his vehicle at the bar's parking lot. To his right there was a large black van and on his left was a white Sedan.

Jiro entered the bar Smokin' hot and looked around the inside. There were two exits: the front entrance he just came through and an exit behind the counter. There was a large-built man behind the enclosed counter, probably the owner of the bar. His head was shaved with a tattoo on it. He was in the middle of wiping down the Collins glass.

Jiro could not say it was a refined bar. The place was unruly, and the employees as well as the customers were ill-bred. There were two men sitting at the counter. They were sitting apart from each other, but they were both drinking a non-alcoholic bottle with the same green label on it. There were three people in a booth near the entrance; each one had a bottle of ginger ale placed on the table. Jiro's client was another man sitting at the furthest table in the room. At least he assumed he was.

Excluding himself, there were six customers in the bar.

This is odd. Something's off.

Jiro felt slightly unhinged. However, he could not ascertain what it was.

“You must be Shimata-san, correct?”

Jiro headed over to the center table and called out to the client. The man had a stubble, and although he called himself Shimata it was likely a fake name.

“Yes,” the client nodded. “And you’re-”

“Yes, I’m the avenger.”

“Nice to meet you,” He shook hands with Jiro. “Thank you for coming.”

Jiro sat down facing the man and asked him, “so what sort of revenge do you

wish for?"

The client languidly said. "I had a pet dog that was killed."

".....a dog, you say?"

"A kid in the neighborhood did a prank by throwing a loaf of bread with rat poisoning into my yard. And my pet dog ate it.The dog died. My daughter who was very fond of it was very shocked."

"How unfortunate."

".....Ah, does it have to be a person to avenge? Do you not accept taking revenge for animals?"

"No, not necessarily."

What his client asked him to do was unexpected, but it was not particularly rare either. Yet there was something about it that caught his attention.

"Have you ever taken a job like this before in the past?" The man asked a strange question.

"Like this as in?" Jiro, not understanding the man's meaning, replied to the question with another question.

"Avenging animals. Have you ever taken a request to avenge dogs or cats?"

Jiro was internally bewildered upon being asked that. *Why would this man ask him these questions?*

"Well," Jiro tried to be ambiguous. "I'm responsible for keeping secrecy, so I cannot talk about other clients."

"That won't do for us if you won't say anything."

The man's attitude abruptly changed. Jiro heard the intimidating tone to his voice along with the click of something metallic. It was from a gun being cocked. A man held up a gun with a sound suppressor on it towards him.

Jiro tutted in his mind. He knew something was fishy. This man was not a client, just as he thought.

".....If you're going to shoot, then go ahead and try." Jiro smirked up at him. He then glanced around the bar. "There are other guests here. And there are

even employees. Would you really pull the trigger in a place with so many eyewitnesses? You'll be reported and captured by the police in no time."

However, the man had little reaction. The reason, Jiro found out, was from what he said next. "This bar is our group's facility. The customers and the employees are our buddies. Even the bar owner is a hitman working under us."

Jiro was taken aback.

He finally realized it. The oddity he felt when he first came in was this.

He shot up from his seat and looked around his surroundings. At some point the other guests had guns, all pointing towards Jiro. The person behind the counter had one pointing to him too. Jiro could not move.

"Sit."

He had no choice but to obey.

".....I thought it was strange," Jiro gave a wry smile as he sat back down with both hands raised. "There were too many non-drinkers in here."

There were two cars in the parking lot when Jiro had arrived. There were five other people besides the client and himself. All of them were drinking non-alcoholic beverages. The reason they would come to a bar and not to drink that Jiro could think of was that they had drove here. But there were only two cars in the parking lot. Even if the others were employees, it was unnatural. Five people at a bar together not drinking alcohol? It clearly was too many to be a coincidence.

So this was a trap.

"Now then," The man in front of him began to speak.

"I'll have you tell us." He took out a tablet device and showed the screen to Jiro. "This video was your work, right?"

The footage was that of a torture session.

It was familiar to him. He had avenged a cat a high schooler had killed. He had Enokida post that video on the website the boy uploaded his videos to, to punish anyone else who had did the same atrocities.

"My, I don't know." But Jiro would not admit to it. "I'm unsure what this is."

There was a gunshot. The man in front of him had pulled the trigger. A sharp pain shot up his arm, and blood spurt out. Jiro's body was pushed back against the wall behind him from the force of the bullet.

"Your other arm will be next."

Jiro bit his lip and glared at the man. Jiro put pressure on his wound with his other hand to try and stop the bleeding.

His dominant arm hurt, but he had get out of this situation somehow. He put his mind to work. The weapon he had on his person was one gun for self-protection. It was fully loaded. But there were five yakuza men and one hitman with guns. He was at an overwhelming disadvantage in a gunfight.

He had to alert Banba somehow and buy time until help arrived.

"Well, I don't really care whether you remain silent about it or not." The man said. "I'll just get it out of that precious kid of yours."

"Wha-"

Jiro's breath caught in his throat. For a moment, Misaki's face appeared in his mind.

Was she caught by these guys?

The man grinned upon seeing Jiro's complexion change. ".....I see. So you got a kid?"

He got me.

He had asked a leading question. Jiro was careless. How could he let himself fall for a simple trick? This was proof that he was losing his composure. He had to calm down.

"I'll ask again. Think hard about it and answer me." The man asked the question again. "This video was your work, right?"

Jiro fell silent.

The unpleasant silence reigned the bar.

What should I do?

Jiro put his mind to work.

The man had said 'our group' earlier. They were definitely yakuza, but Jiro could not grasp their objective. *Why would the yakuza be after the person behind the revenge of the high school boy?*

The man grew tired of waiting for Jiro to reply after so long and went to speak, when something happened.

The doorbell suddenly chimed, breaking the silence. Someone had came in. All of them turned around, turning their focus over to the entrance.

"Hey, can't you read?" The hitman running the bar called out to the person first. The sign reading 'close' was hung on the door knob. "We're closed for today-"

The hitman's expression stiffened.

Everyone there was dumbfounded seeing the person who appeared.

It was a clown.

The man wore a peculiar outfit like a clown. He wore a round red hat on his head, and underneath it he looked like to have dull pink, wavy hair. His face was painted white with greasepaint and red coating of paint for makeup, but the left and right sides of his face differed. The lipstick on his left side of his mouth curved upward, and the right side of his mouth was painted downward. A tear mark was drawn below his right eye. It looked like the left side of his face was smiling while the right was crying.

The clothes the man wore were asymmetrical too. He wore a dark red shirt, but the designs on his vest on the left and right side did not match. The right side was pure black, but the left side had a black and white diamond-pattern to it. The man wore bright red slacks with cuffs that were rolled up at his knees, and his socks that were poking out from underneath them had a border line pattern for the right sock and the left was a diamond pattern.

He had a small red, false nose and a black bowtie. The shoes he wore were dark red clown shoes that were rounded at the tip. His outfit gave the impression of that of a street performer.

Jiro and the yakuza men were awestruck and at a loss for words, watching as the clown walked into the bar while humming a tune. The man gripped the flange of his hat and bowed in gesture as though a show was about to begin.

“.....Who the hell is this?”

One of the men voiced.

“This guy is hella creepy.”

“You having a costume party nearby or something?”

Some of the men laughed at the man who was dressed inappropriately, sticking out like a sore thumb. But their smiles froze for a moment.

“Hey, clown guy, hurry up and get outta-” The hitman walked up to the clown to shoo him away when his yelling abruptly changed to that of a groan.

“Uugah.”

The clown had taken out a blade out of nowhere and had thrown it at the man. The knife struck directly into the hitman’s throat.

“What the hell are you doing?!”

“You’re dead!”

The yakuza men got into an uproar at the sudden guest’s actions. The men all pulled the triggers on the guns they held; the repulsive sounds going off in quick succession. The barrage of bullets were all aimed at the clown at once. The clown dodged them all on light feet. He was taking steps as though dancing and hid himself in their blind spots.

Bullets flew around the inside of the shop as though it was the front line of the battlefield. Jiro ducked under the table as to not get hit by stray bullets. He looked out and examined the battle ground. He heard the clown’s laughter mixed in with the gunshots.

Just who is that clown?

But this was not the time to be wondering that. Jiro had to take this chance and get out of there.

While the men were preoccupied with the assault on them, Jiro leapt over the

counter and rushed outside through the back exit.

The gun shots continued until everyone ran out of bullets.



‘This bar is actually a front business run by the Mutagawa Group.’

Enokida stopped Misaki and told her that.

‘This information is a service. I don’t need more pay for giving it to you.’

Enokida then added. ‘There was a post on underground jobs of someone wanting information on the avengers. When I looked into the origin of the post, I found it was from the Mutagawa Group.’

The Mutagawa Group was looking for an avenger, and the place Jiro’s client set up to meet at was at the Mutagawa’s bar. This was not a coincidence. Someone from the Mutagawa Group had pretended to be a client and called up Jiro on there.

Then Jiro-chan’s in danger.

Misaki took off. Since Jiro’s bar was in the Nakasu neighborhood, she knew the area well. When she asked for the place’s address, she knew where the bar was exactly. Misaki headed over there while making sure to avoid the Nakasu police.

The neon lights for the bar Smokin’ hot’s sign was lit, but the sign hanging on the doorknob read closed.

It would not be a good idea for her to just barge in. She first had to examine the situation inside. Misaki moved towards the back. For some reason, the glass window was broken.

Misaki peered inside the bar, standing on her tiptoes.

There was a man’s face.

That was the first thing she saw. She refrained herself from screaming. The man’s face was upside down. His bloodshot eyes were wide, and below was his mouth. He was suspended upside down, dead.

The corpse's face was gazing blindly in her direction. Misaki turned her attention to inside the bar, trembling.

There was no one who looked like Jiro in there. There were more bodies hanging instead.

There was someone else there. A man wearing red clothes was moving around the bar. He was hanging up another body while humming cheerfully.

Did this man kill all of these men?

In the next second, the man turned around. His white face was facing towards her. Misaki felt her voice trying to escape upon seeing his creepy figure. She instantly covered her mouth with her hands and bit her lips to silence herself.

The man with the white face had seen her.

Her heart thudded in her chest.

This isn't good. He spotted me.

He had noticed her.

I have to get away; I need to get far away from here quickly—

Her heartbeat quickened. Misaki scolded her cowering body and turned on her heel.

“Hey.”

Misaki yelped when a voice abruptly called out to her.

The man stood in front of her.

Her heart leapt in her chest once more.

I'm going to be killed.

When she attempted to flee, his red arm reached out and wrapped around Misaki's waist, and his other hand covered her mouth. She was unable to escape or call for help.

The man picked up Misaki while humming a tune.



Bottom of the Fifth Inning

“What on earth happened here.....?”

Kase was bewildered at the sight.

“.....This is terrible.” Sanjou could only groan out that next to him. They had rushed over as soon as they were contacted, but the tragedy that happened here at the bar Smokin’ hot was worse than they imagined.

Six corpses were hung inside the bar. All of them were hung upside down. Their legs were bound together by a rope that was fastened to a pillar that reached the ceiling. All the bodies had both their arms dangling down towards the floor.

And even more bizarrely was that there were marks on the bodies’ faces. They had no idea what they stood for.

What was clear to them was that they had lost six important pawns: five of Sanjou’s lackeys and a hitman working for their group.

“Ishihara,” Sanjou called out to the sole survivor and witness to the event, Ishihara. “What happened here?”

Ishihara was spared since he hid himself in the refrigerator. He was in a stupor when Sanjou and his men arrived.

Fortunately he had only gotten minorly ill. Ishihara had been given immediate treatment, but he was still chilled. He was sitting hunched over himself. Maybe he was cold because he was in the refrigerator for a long period of time or it was because of the blood loss. Or it could have been from fear. He spoke with trembling lips. “.....There was a strange guy that came in when we started questioning the avenger.”

“A strange guy?”

“He was really odd. He was dressed up like a freakin’ clown.” Ishihara pointed over to the counter. “Carlos threatened him.”

Carlos was the hitman and bartender here. He was half-Venezuelan. And now he was hung upside down above the counter.

"The guy threw a knife at him. And it struck Carlos in the throat.....And then everyone pulled out their guns-"

"And it became a gunfight?"

There were numerous gunshot marks that could be seen on the walls and the windows were broken as well.

"It was just us shooting him rather than a gunfight between us. He didn't have a gun, so he nimbly ran around the bar....."

It was not just the windows that were broken. The alcohol bottles and glassware behind the counter were shattered too.

"Once we ran out of bullets, he rushed at us." Ishihara thought back on the situation and grimaced. "I thought he would throw more knives, but he used juggling clubs instead.....That guy was killing everyone while smiling like he was high on drugs on something."

Sanjou questioned him, pointing to the bodies hanging upside down. "Did that man do this too?"

".....I think so. That guy remained here for a while doing something."

The clown had apparently walked around the bar while humming.

"This manner of killing," Kase recalled something and chimed in. "The Noma Group guys were killed in the same way."

"The Noma Group? Is that true?"

Kase nodded. "I heard about it from a cop I know. He said the guys from the Noma Group were hung upside down like this too."

Then perhaps someone had hired that man to attack the Noma Group and their group. "Is this clown a hitman?"

".....I don't know." Ishihara said, slumping forward. He was still shaking. "He was just super creepy and terrifyingly strong. He easily killed a hitman of ours."

Sanjou sighed. ".....This has gotten out of hand."

Translation Notes:

In Japan, it's a 0% alcohol tolerance when driving. So if it's unusual for that many people to be drinking non-alcoholic beverages when they had to drive afterwards in western cultures standards, it is even more so under Japanese law.

Sixth Inning

Top of the Sixth Inning

The unsettling and unknown clown wrapped a rope around the captive Misaki's limbs, restraining her. The rope he used was likely the same as the ones he used to hang the bodies. The clown took her and put her in a bright red RV parked in front of the bar. The outlandish vehicle was apparently his. Once the clown plopped Misaki into the passenger's seat, he started the car and took off.

The vehicle was running for a while until it stopped, parking somewhere. After he had gotten out of the driver's seat with Misaki in his hold, he moved to the back of the vehicle which served as a living space. It was not that large, but it felt like one room rather than the interior of a car. The area was peculiar, somewhat distanced from the real place they were in. All four walls were decorated with diamond-patterned wallpaper, and the interior was a gothic style with black and purple as its primary color scheme. There was a long table with cabriole legs set up in the center area. A matching designer sofa was next to it, covered by a smooth black leather material with creepy-looking dolls and plush toys situated on top of it. Other furniture Misaki had never seen before was also there from a dresser and stool to a large, engraved golden mirror. Misaki felt like she had wandered into another country or world.

The clown first took off the rope on Misaki's limbs. He then picked up Misaki with both hands and carefully placed her down onto the sofa.

I'm scared. Misaki could not help but bear fear towards this creepy clown in front of her. He had an unreadable expression, his mask that was his makeup making it uncertain whether he was smiling or crying. He had features that would unsettle anyone who saw him, let alone the crazed actions he made just previously, tampering with the bodies at that bar. He was a serial killer.

He may kill me too.

Misaki trembled, teeth chattering. She looked down at the ground. There were small sneakers on it. They could not be the man's shoes. They looked like

they belonged to an elementary school boy.

“.....Whose shoes are these?”

When Misaki pointed to them in question, the clown answered her cheerfully. “Those shoes are a boy’s. He was here before you.”

“A boy?”

This clown had previously kidnapped and taken someone here too then.

“Who was that child? Where is he?”

“He cried. He was annoying.”

He did not communicate well.

“He wasn’t being a good boy, so we didn’t need him.”

A chill ran up her spine.

The boy was not behaving, so the clown did not need him anymore.

Then.....did he kill him?

Misaki did not have the courage to ask. Instead, she sniffed the area. There was no foul odor. There was no smell of blood or decomposition either. He did not seem to be hiding a body in the RV at least.

But Misaki could not let her guard down. She was unsure if and when she would be killed by him.

Jiro had told her if she ever got kidnapped by someone that she had to observe her situation.

Who had kidnapped her? What was their objective? Where was she at right now? And was there any means of escape?

She observed her surroundings to try and get a grasp on her situation. If the man’s objective was to take her life, then she had to get away if she could not kill him. Otherwise, she had to buy as much time as she could until help arrived. That was what Jiro had taught her.

First, she had to figure out his motive.

“.....Why did you bring me here?” Misaki asked him, praying that he did not

have the intention of killing her.

“Become that one’s friend.”

The clown replied, grinning.

“That one?”

“Yeah, that one.”

Misaki carefully examined the owner of this room. He seemed to be around twenty years old, but he was behaving like a child for some reason. He spoke like one too.

There’s something odd about this man.

He did not seem to have a normal mental state; he was unstable. Misaki assumed it would be better not to upset him and just fulfill his desires. If she did that, he would be satisfied and could possibly let her go.

This man had said just now that the boy ‘cried,’ and was ‘annoying.’ And because of that, he had done something to the boy.

Then as long as she did not cry, she would be okay. She just had to follow his instructions obediently.

“I got it.” Misaki nodded. “I’ll be their friend.”

The clown was appeased hearing her answer.

Just who was ‘that one’ he had mentioned?

“Going to let you meet him now.”

Just as she started wondering who it could be to herself, the clown had closed his eyes. The next moment, his limbs flopped down unceremoniously like a marionette with its strings cut. After a few moments, the clown opened his eyes and looked at Misaki in shock.

“Wh-who are you?”

The tone to his voice was different. It was the voice of a child.

Misaki noticed immediately something was wrong. It was like he was a different person. Or perhaps this was the real one.

Could it be a split personality?

If that was the case, then Misaki could comprehend the sudden change to his demeanor. He must have switched places with the other personality inside him.

The clown cowered in a corner of the room while sobbing like a child. He curled up into a ball and shook.

“Stop. It hurts.” He held his head and began to scream. “Stop, dad!”

Misaki was taken aback seeing his state.

He's the same, she thought.

He's the same as me back then.

Even after she had been taken in by Jiro, she would occasionally relive her memories of being abused. She apparently had post-traumatic stress disorder. The most trivial things acted as a switch for her memories. In Misaki's case, it was cigarettes. She would see her step-father on occasion because of them.

One day they were having lunch when she heard a small metallic click – a familiar sound to her. When she looked up at Jiro, she saw him with a cigarette in his mouth with a lighter in hand to light it. The moment she realized the sound was from the cap of the lighter opening, her mind forcefully cut over to her past, the memories pouring into her mind.

Her step-father was closing in on her, cigarette in his mouth. He was going to press the flame of the cigarette against her back-

‘Misaki, it's alright.’

Hearing Jiro's voice, Misaki returned to herself.

‘Your dad isn't here.’

She seemed to have been screaming her step-father's name unconsciously. She realized tears were streaming down her cheeks. Just by hearing the sound of a lighter had caused her to remember her abuse from her step-father. This had dawned on Jiro.

‘.....Cigarettes scare you, don't they?’

Misaki remained silent. She gazed up at Jiro, closely examining his face. If she

did not say she was okay, would he be displeased?

Before Misaki could reply, Jiro nodded in understanding. 'Of course you would be. He had given you those scars with them.'

Once he said that, he took the cigarette carton he just opened up and tossed it into the garbage.

'I was just thinking about quitting.' Jiro smiled at the shocked Misaki. 'This is a good opportunity.'

Ever since that day, he had never smoked again.

The man trembling in front of her right now was the exact same as her four year-old self.

"You don't have to be scared," Misaki quietly spoke to him as to not frighten him, just like Jiro did for her that day. "Your dad isn't here."

When Misaki told him that, he seemed to have been relieved, falling unconscious shortly after. A few seconds later, the man instantly opened his eyes again before grinning at her.

"Did you become friends?"

His voice had changed. He came back, having changed places with his other personality.

"I tried, but he got scared. He went away almost immediately."

The clown's shoulders slumped with a dejected expression. "That one is a scaredy-cat."

Misaki looked him over and noticed.

"You're hurt." She was not able to tell before due to his red clothes, but he was bleeding on his arm. "I'll patch you up."



"Ow, ow, ow."

Jiro seethed when the bandages were tightly fastened.

“Stop it, Saeki-chan. Be gentle with me.” He glared at the man in white with a tearful voice.

Having escaped the bar Smokin’ hot, Jiro rushed out of there in his car and dropped by Saeki’s clinic to have his shot wound attended to.

Once Saeki removed the bullet from his body and sewed the wound closed, he gave a sigh.

“I’m amazed you only got this hurt despite being surrounded by six yakuza men with guns.” He said in a shocked tone.

“.....I was fortunate.”

Even for him, he considered to be very lucky to escape trouble. If it was not for that clown’s arrival, he would have been interrogated by them by now. He would have gotten more than the one gunshot wound. He truly was lucky. He sat up on the bed and exhaled once. He finally started to calm down from his hyper attentive state.

He suddenly recalled. He had gotten a call from Enokida earlier before he had went to the bar. *What could have he wanted?* Jiro took out his cell phone to call him.

The other immediately picked up. “Hello, Enokida-chan?”

‘Ah, Jiro-san.’

“What did you need to talk about earlier?”

‘Talk about?’

Enokida raised his voice after a few moments of silence.

‘Ah, that’s right. Apparently there’s a gang called the Mutagawa Group that was hunting down an avenger.’

“.....I wished you had told me sooner.”

‘Ah, were you already attacked by them then?’ Enokida laughed.

“It was awful.” Jiro shrugged. His wound throbbed.

‘Well anyway, it doesn’t seem like the Mutagawa Group and the avengers don’t have any correlation with each other, so I assume someone who resented

you must have tasked the Mutagawa Group to track you down.'

"There are too many people who come to mind, so I can't say who it could be."

'I bet.'

It had to be someone with a grudge against him and had a connection to the yakuza. There were numerous people it could be from his past targets.

"That was all you wanted to talk to me about? You're not hiding anything else, are you?"

'This is all the information I could tell you at the moment. I'll look into the Mutagawa Group more, and I'll let you know if I find anything else.'

"Okay then. Thank you." Jiro hung up then.

Saeki waited for Jiro to finish talking before speaking to him. "You can rest here for the night."

Jiro glanced over to the blue sheets on the bed next to him and grimaced. "No way. You want me to sleep next to a corpse?"

"He was a fairly handsome guy," Saeki pulled back the sheets, revealing a young man.

"Oh my, he really is. I wish I could have met him when he was still alive." Jiro shook his head after cracking a joke. "But I'm sorry. I have to go home today."

He was worried about Misaki.

But the moment he stood up he staggered and collapsed onto the bed.

"Jiro-san, are you okay?" Saeki rushed over to him.

His awareness was faint. He was uncertain whether it was from the drugs or the blood loss, but he was unable to move his body like he wanted.

Jiro closed his eyes, overcome by an intense drowsiness.

Bottom of the Sixth Inning

'We've got a serious problem, Ishihara-san.'

Ishihara got a call from Kase after he rested at his home when the date had

changed.

Twice a day – once in the morning and once at night – he would have Kase give food they had purchased at the convenience store for the children they held up in the warehouse. It was just a simple errand of feeding them, but it also served as a time to check up on them.

Their usual meal time was delayed by a few hours because of the incident from the previous night. For Ishihara to get a notification from Kase that there was a ‘serious problem,’ that meant something had happened to one of their merchandise. Ishihara had an ill premonition. “What is it?”

When he questioned him in a low voice, Kase replied back, flustered ‘One of the kids is dead.’

Ishihara’s mind went completely blank for a moment.

“.....What did you say?” He asked again, scowling. “What happened?”

One is dead? How?

All of the children were put in cages. They should be sitting idle in them.

Yet why is one dead?

‘It was anaphylaxie.’

Kase answered to dispel Ishihara’s confusion, mentioning an unusual term.

“.....What was that?”

‘One of the kids had an allergy to crustacean and didn’t have a good reaction with the shrimp-filled onigiri he had that morning.’

They died from shock due to an allergy. That was beyond Ishihara’s expectations.

“You dumb shit!”

Ishihara cursed, slamming his fists on the table.

The deal was going to happen tomorrow. They could not back down and say they were down one kid now. *What should I do?* Ishihara braced his head in his hands. He got nervous and as his gaze wandered he spotted a newspaper left on the dining table. It was the morning paper from this morning. His attention

was caught by the headline of the article, 'an unknown child has been found.' A boy had been abducted by someone and was found safe and taken to a shelter. The culprit was suspected of being a pedophile.

An idea popped into Ishihara's head. If they kidnapped another child at this time, they could easily put the blame on this culprit.

"We're going to get another one."

All they needed was the numbers. The method in obtaining it did not matter.

"Fortunately for us, it's the Hojoya season. There are going to be a lot of kids loitering around."

Hojoya was Fukuoka's autumn festival. People would be packed on the streets to shrines, and naturally there would be an abundance of children there as well.

"Let's kidnap some tomorrow."



Securing a route for human trafficking was Sanjou's ambition for many years now. He had been competing for patrons by selling just guns and drugs while struggling to pay enough to the government. But because of that, he still had room to make human trafficking plausible. The underground world in Japan had considerably less in shares for human trafficking compared to foreign countries. Even so, Japanese children were in demand and could be sold for a high price. Hence, Sanjou waited for the right moment.

However, there were few outlets that would sell the children. Sanjou avoided any business with companies that had no successful results. Instead, he used his connections to make a deal with a human trafficker from overseas. Their demand was to provide them five children.

Four of the children Sanjou had obtained by threatening someone working in an orphanage who purchased drugs from the Mutagawa Group. But even with that method, he was only able to get four out of the five needed, and he was unable to find the last one. It was then that Ishihara had his son snatch a child for them. Now that they had the five children, they would smuggle them into Korea. In order for that to be possible, Sanjou required the assistance of

Yamazaki's transportation company.

"It seems you're having your own fair of troubles."

When Sanjou met up with Kunio Yamazaki for his periodic report and told him about what had happened the night before at Smokin' hot, he had made a bitter expression.

Sanjou nodded while drinking his branded tea at the usual tea shop. "Yes, it was an utter disaster."

He did not expect six of his men to be killed that day. Yamazaki wanted to keep the number of people involved to a minimum, and that was Sanjou's objective as well. Excluding Sanjou, there were only Ishihara and Kase who remained.

"So, did it affect the plan in any way?"

"We have the numbers needed for the merchandise. All we need to do now is to put them on a truck and send them off onto a boat. The remaining number of people should be able to carry out the operation."

Sanjou did not have any more hands available for the task. He had to have the two remaining members carry it out.

If they succeed in this trade, they would be able to establish trust. They would be able to make a business connection with the human trafficking syndicate. After that, they just had to keep providing more kids. And for that, Sanjou already had a plan devised.

Under the current laws established, as long as they had the specified requirements they would be allowed to run an establishment for orphan children to dwell at. They could take in children requiring protection and raise them in a normal home. As a type II social welfare service, they would be provided 200,000 yen by the country for office and operation expenses per child. If they managed to pass the conditions while keeping the Mutagawa Group hidden and were acknowledged by the municipality, they would be able to start a an orphanage and acquire a multitude of children with no relatives or family connections. Then they would smuggle the children put under their care out of the country with the help of the Yamazaki transportation service. That

was Sanjou's plan for the future.

His plan was proceeding smoothly. That was until the tragic incident occurred at Smokin' hot the other night.

"I just need one person." Sanjou spoke. "I'm thinking of hiring a new hitman."

"A hitman?"

"Yes, since our Carlos was killed, we would need a skilled hitman. A few men from the Noma Group were killed during a drug trade a few days ago. The exact same culprit behind that incident is targeting our group as well. If by chance he were to attack us during the trade, our plan would fall apart."

"I see," Yamazaki was understanding. "Then do as you need to."

He told him and left after paying his own check.

The trade would take place later tonight.

Translation Notes:

1. The Hojoya Festival is one of the three major festivals celebrated in Hakata. It's a memorial ritual where they release animals into the wild. Read more [here](#).
2. This issue is one of the lesser known in Japan and even less known to foreigners, but the country has a huge problem with children being stuck in and growing up in institutions, foster homes, and orphanages. Only a very small percentage of children actually get adopted. There are many children who are removed from their neglectful and/or abusive families and are sent to one of these facilities, and most don't leave until adulthood. They are generally below average in academic levels compared to everyone else and are discriminated against, making it hard for them to adapt to Japanese society, go to college, get good jobs, etc. And there are even more issues regarding this topic, like how difficult it is for someone to lose parental rights even when they leave their child in an orphanage or child institution, abuse in some facilities themselves, and more. I found [this blog post](#) to be very helpful and mentions almost every point you can find in other articles. And [this article](#) discusses the primary issues of the current system in place.

Seventh Inning

Top of the Seventh Inning

“A clown?”

When Enokida replied back in question, Shigematsu had nodded with a serious expression. “Yes, a clown. You know, someone who has their face painted white and has a red false nose.”

“.....You’re kidding with me, right?”

The murder cases with the men being hung upside down kept bothering Enokida. Who had asked him for information? What was his objective? Why did he kill people in that manner? Enokida wanted to know those unsolved questions.

Noticing that the police had gotten numerous information on the cases, Enokida had called Shigematsu to find out more. They met at a mentaiko restaurant in west Nakasu. There were posters signed by baseball players put up at the entrance of the restaurant.

They ordered two of the specialty cuisine, *mentaiju*. It was a specialty which had mentaiko neatly placed over rice and seaweed packed into a stacking box.

Shigematsu told him everything about the culprit in exchange for a free meal. According to him, the police had already figured out the man’s identity and that he was dressed as a clown. Enokida had thought it was a joke, but Shigematsu was serious. Since there was a killer who wore a Niwaka mask around, it was not that strange for a serial killer dressed as a clown to exist either.

“A portion of us call him the psycho clown – the second coming of Gacy.”

“Gacy as in John Wayne Gacy?”

John Wayne Gacy – alias the Killer Clown – was a famous American serial killer who killed thirty-three boys between the ages of nine and twelve. Gacy would visit welfare facilities dressed up as the clown Pogo and engaged in volunteer events for children while murdering young boys.

“Yeah, that Gacy.” Shigematsu nodded, grabbing the mentaiko with his chopsticks. “This psycho killer had apparently kidnapped a child before. So there were rumors going around wondering if he was a pedophile who loved to kill.”

A clown, and a murderer with a preference for children. So that was why some had called him the second coming of Gacy.

“So does this psycho clown dress like one to lure children?”

“No,” Shigematsu shook his head. “He’s a real clown. He was originally a traveling street performer and traveled around overseas in an RV with his father. He was trained to do street performance by him. His father had sent him to America to learn the craft and had him join a traveling circus.”

“You know a lot about him.”

“I heard all of this from someone well-informed about him.”

There was something else Enokida wanted to ask. “So even though you know all this, why are the police letting the psycho clown be?”

Shigematsu shrugged at that. “The higher ups want him loose. He accomplishes something that we can’t.”

“.....And what’s that?”

“All the guys this clown targets are people better off being killed off.”

The psycho killer had been murdering several people from gangs at this point. “But his latest targets were regular citizens, right?”

“Besides her abusive behavior, Mari Aikawa had also coerced her daughter to shoplift. She had always blamed her daughter for doing it on her own. The second person he killed, Ryouji Aoyama, was a pedophile. He assaulted his stepson. The boy was traumatized and unable to indict him. He was put through speech therapy and counselling, but his condition has made no improvements. Unless they are taken away from their parents as soon as possible, they would all turn out for the worse. But as the parents are the source of the problem, we can’t let them be. The children would be without protection no matter how much time passes otherwise.”

“I see.” Enokida understood their aim. “They plan to clean up the social pathology by letting that mad man take care of them.”

So the police would let the serial killer do as he pleased. Once his role had finished, the psycho clown would be of no more use to them and be arrested then.

“However,” there was one thing that still bothered him. “Why is that clown killing yakuza members and abusive people? Was he tasked to do it by someone?”

“No, he’s doing it on his own.” Shigematsu stated. “He’s a murderer, but he’s not a hitman.”

“So he’s volunteering to kill the social evils in the world? He must have a lot of time on his hands.”

“The reason for his actions was due to his childhood.....But I suggest asking questions to the person who knows about him directly.”

Shigematsu said, taking out a business card. It was for a psychiatrist who worked in a hospital somewhere in the city. He must be the ‘well-informed’ person Shigematsu had mentioned.

“A psychiatrist?”

“Yeah,” Shigematsu nodded. “He was the doctor who examined the psycho clown.”



Misaki had spent the night on the sofa in the room of her captor and was relieved to see another day when she woke up the following morning. So far she had managed to survive one day.

“Good morning,”

The clown stood right next to her. He was topless and his hair was wet. Although he must have taken a shower, his stage makeup was still firmly applied to his face.

The clown smiled while drying his hair with a towel. With the edges of his

bright red mouth curved up in a broad smile, Misaki felt shivers run down her spine. She felt like today was going to be unpleasant with that face being the first thing she saw in the morning.

“.....Good morning.” Misaki replied as she sat up.

She had somewhat gotten used to seeing this unsettling man. He may be insane, but he was not completely inadequate to converse with. If she was friendly towards him, he would treat her the same. For now anyway.

When the clown turned his back to Misaki, she saw horrific scars that contrasted his clean yet stiff body. There were numerous old scars carved into his back. They looked painful.

“Hey,” Misaki unintentionally spoke up. “How did you get those scars?”

“Scars?” He tilted his head in confusion as he put on his red shirt.

“On your back.”

When she pointed to them, the clown nodded in understanding. “Those were from dad.”

Dad – he was hurt by his father?

“So you really were.....abused then.”

“Méqué did.”

“Méqué?”

The clown pointed to his own face and repeated what he said, “Méqué.”

“Your name is Méqué?”

He nodded. He then sat down on the stool and told her. “Dad always hit that one.”

He must be referring to his other personality when he mentioned ‘that one.’ He was the frightened personality she encountered the night before.

“So Méqué helped that one and would be hit in that one’s place.”

“.....You substituted for him.”

That was familiar to Misaki. When she was abused by her step-father, she

would occasionally space out. It felt as though she was dreaming and she was not fully herself in those moments.

The doctors had said it was a form of dissociative disorder, and it was an experience anyone could experience, so that in itself was alright. But if the symptoms had persisted, perhaps there was the chance she herself could have formed another personality as well.

But it was thanks to Jiro that that did not happen. Ever since she began to live with him, those moments of dissociation lessened.

Misaki had Jiro. But Méqué did not have anyone. As such, his condition had gotten worse. Misaki could not help but feel sorry for him.

“You’ve been going through all this by yourself, haven’t you?”

Méqué had taken the abuse in his other personality’s place. He sacrificed himself in order to protect the main personality. He must have suffered greatly for it.

Méqué had told her that he wanted her to become friends with that one. He must have convinced himself that the other one wanted a friend.

But that had to be his own wish.

“I think you need a friend, Méqué.”

When Misaki said that, his expression had changed. His eyes grew wide in shock, and he looked over to her. “How did you know Méqué wanted a friend?”

Of course I could figure that out. After all, you’re the same as me.

“I’ll become your friend.”

If she could get close to him, then she may be able to get out of here. Misaki felt sympathy towards Méqué while thinking that calculatingly to herself; a man who was raised in a similar environment as her.

“You will?”

“Not ‘you.’ It’s Misaki.”

“Misaki,” Méqué had repeated in a small voice.

“I have scars on my back too. My step-dad made them, so we match.” When

she smiled at him, Méqué's eyes had widened. "We are?"

"Yeah," Misaki nodded. "The butt of a lit cigarette was pressed against me. It was super hot and it hurt a lot and.....I was so scared."

Méqué's hand reached out to her. She had tensed for a moment, unsure what he would do, but he just placed his hand on Misaki's head.

"There's nothing to be scared of."

He told her while he patted her head.

She did not expect that.

He's actually quite nice.

".....Hey, Méqué." Despite being kind hearted, she wondered why he did what he does. "Why do you kill people?"



The man Shigematsu referred him to was a doctor working at a psychiatric hospital in Fukuoka City. Shigematsu had already made preparations for Enokida to meet him. Enokida dropped by the hospital after working hours and was brought to the person in question right away. The man was waiting in the director's office. The middle-aged man, around fifty years-old, had white strands mixed into his hair, making him look appropriate in the white garments he wore.

"I still remember him very well."

Once Enokida sat down in the guest's chair and asked him about the clown, the psychiatrist began to talk at length about the man.

"He was institutionalized once his father passed away, since he had no other relatives. However, he was admitted to a short-term therapy facility for emotionally disturbed children instead of an orphanage. I was working at that facility at that time."

A short-term therapy facility for emotionally disturbed children. It was a daycare center where children who needed treatment for the psychological scars inflicted on them were admitted to.

"So he had a mental issue then?"

The psychiatrist nodded at Enokida's frank question. "He had a form of dissociative identity disorder."

By dissociative identity disorder, he meant multiple personality disorder.

"We persistently had him go through multiple counseling sessions and managed to get a glimpse into the darkness in his mind. He had another personality that existed inside of him."

"They say a child forms another personality as a means to protect themselves from some sort of pain."

"Yes, indeed. He had been abused by his father for a long period of time."

"His father was a traveling performer, correct?" That was what Shigematsu had told him.

"It was a unique occupation. The boy was harshly trained to learn the craft by his father at a young age. If he didn't do good enough, he would receive various forms of punishment. He would get struck by a whip or get his meals taken away from him. Apparently, he was once stripped naked and locked out of the RV all night while it was snowing. His father always had spoke ill of him, telling him he was a failure. He would force him to practice while verbally abusing him by calling him worthless, trash, and someone who couldn't do anything."

The clown had received psychological abuse to damage his mind in addition to the physical abuse he received. For a child, those days must have been hell.

"If he failed to perform a trick right, his father would hang him upside down as punishment. If he messed up with juggling once, he would be hung for ten minutes. If he messed five times, he would hang for fifty minutes."

When Enokida heard the doctor mention 'being hung upside down,' he instantly made the connection.

All the bodies in the murder cases done by the clown were hung upside down. "Were his legs tied together with rope and he was hung by a pillar? With his hands dangling downward?"

"Exactly that. There were even times he had been whipped while suspended

upside down like that.”

“.....So that’s it.” Enokida smirked. “That’s why he hangs them that way.”

Put simply, it was punishment for them – a punishment for those who did something wrong. The clown gave them the same punishment his father had done to him.

“He had mentally reached one day when he was receiving the usual abuse from his father. He desperately convinced himself that it wasn’t him being treated that way. This resulted in him creating a new personality. Something more familiar to him – the personality of a clown.”

The doctor paused for a few moments before resuming again.

“That personality called himself Méqué. Méqué took the abuse from his father in the place of his main personality. Whenever his father lashed out at him, his main personality would retreat inside himself and Méqué would take his place. His original personality was much more fearful of the outside world and was extremely reclusive. And so the time he spent outside was reversed. Méqué was meant to be a standin personality, but he would be in control for almost the entire day. When he came under our care, he even referred to himself as Méqué as well, at the time.”

“I see.”

Enokida nodded. He understood why Shigematsu avoided giving him the explanation when he saw him. An amateur could not talk about someone’s complex history like this nor would it be easy to talk about it over a meal.

“Méqué was always smiling and hummed tunes frequently during his stay in the institution. When we asked him what tune he was humming to was, he told us it was an aria. His father had apparently taken him to see an opera once, and ever since then he had been humming the song he heard there.”

To him, that may have been his most precious memory he had with his father.

“Sometimes children who were abused tend to go into fits of anger or lash out at other children. But Méqué did not do that. He was always quiet and peaceful. Sometimes he would stand quietly in a corner of the room with a light smile on his face, and other times he would put on a show with the performing

techniques he learned from his father when there were other people around. Everyone was happy to see Méqué perform. The other children who were also abused smiled happily as well. And Méqué was happy doing it.”

From what Enokida had heard so far of him, Méqué sounded like a friendly young man. He did not sound like some psycho clown. “Was there any change in him then? Any indication for his violent behavior?”

The doctor fell silent. He must have been thinking back on older memories.

“There was one extremely rare case when he blew up in anger. There was a child who wasn’t listening to others, and when he lashed out at the other kids Méqué got furious. He struck the child and strangled him. By the time the employees jumped in to stop him, he had calmed down and returned to his usual self. I guess a good way to describe him is that he had a strong sense of what was right. He often mentioned, ‘I want to make a world where all the children can live smiling.’”

The doctor gave a small sigh.

“Méqué appeared to have recovered. He left the institute when he was eighteen. Even though he was mentally young, it was not like his IQ was low. He was a sharp kid. He must have pretended to have recovered and deceived us. Still, the chance of a child with split personality disorder to become a criminal is small. When I heard he was killing people, I was shocked but also not too surprised he would do that.”

Enokida was still not out of questions. “Why do you think Méqué was after people connected with drugs?”

He still did not understand why the psycho clown killed the drug dealer and the yakuza men.

However, the doctor seemed to have an idea why. “I assume he was carrying out his mission.”

“.....His mission?”

“It is said there are various types of psychopathic serial killers. If there were people who committed murder for pleasure, there were also those who went around killing people obsessed in their disillusionments. And among all of those

people, there are also those who believe it is their mission to kill people. Méqué is that type.”

What the doctor said suddenly reminded Enokida of something. There was a policeman who killed several drug dealers in America long ago. The police officer had apparently believed that public order was poor due to the spread of drugs. As a result, he killed dealers with his own hand, believing it was his mission as a police officer to protect the city and its people.

Méqué was doing the same thing.

“He gave himself the mission to eliminate abuse from the world. His father was a drug addict. He must have thought the cause of his parent abusing him was because of the drugs.”

“In other words, he believed he could accomplish his mission by getting rid of drug rings?”

In terms of murder motivations, his was extremely pure and too simple.

Méqué the Clown despised abuse more than anyone. He hated the senseless and ruthless violence parents do to their children that took away their smiles.

“But Méqué realized that wouldn’t do and changed his target.”

Enokida knew what it was. “He started killing the abusive parents themselves.”

“Exactly. They say there is a link to abuse. Statistics show that 30 to 40 percent of people who were abused as children grow up to abuse their own children when they become adults.”

Méqué was trying to cut that link. And that was why he had asked Enokida for information earlier. He hung the bodies upside down as punishment just like he was put through when he was younger. He scrawled on their faces for others to identify his victims and himself. And there was a reason behind his actions.

Enokida was finally able to picture the psycho clown wrapped in darkness from the doctor who formerly examined him.

“.....They say you can’t choose your parents,” after leaving the hospital, Enokida whispered to himself with a small smile. “But that man is still better

than those guys.”



Jiro awoke on a pure white bed and shot up, recalling the events from the previous day. He had been treated by Saeki and fell unconscious afterwards.

“How do you feel?”

Saeki peered over, examining his face. Jiro hastily asked. “Saeki-chan, what time is it?”

“Don’t move so quickly,” Saeki glanced at his watch after remonstrating Jiro from trying to stand up. “It’s past four right now.”

“Four in the morning?”

“No, in the evening.”

Shoot.

More than half a day had passed. Even though he sustained injury, he could not help but be annoyed at himself for falling asleep.

“I have to go home!”

Jiro was worried about Misaki.

He brushed off Saeki’s attempt to stop him and rushed out of the clinic.

No matter how many times he called, Misaki did not pick up. He had a bad feeling about this. Upon arriving back to their apartment, Jiro quietly opened to door, weary.

He heard mewing. It was their cat. His full name was Cromartie. He was a black cat they picked up after a job and brought him home. They had to move to a property that allowed pets to keep him.

For a weary cat to show itself defenseless probably meant their home was safe. Jiro did not see any traces of someone infiltrating. He was relieved for the present moment.

“Kuro-chan, I’m home.”

Kuro nestled up against his feet when he stepped inside. He followed him around persistently. He behaved like this when he was hungry.

“Did Misaki not give you food?”

His food dish was empty. Once Jiro gave him cat food, Kuro began to munch on it.

“Hey, Misaki.”

Jiro called her name, but there was no response.

Misaki was nowhere to be found. There was just a letter left on the table instead.

‘I’m leaving home. Please don’t look for me.’

That was written on the white paper. It was Misaki’s handwriting.

Leaving home?

“.....This isn’t real.” Jiro covered his hand over his mouth in shock.

His breathing quickened.

He immediately looked back on the GPS log on Misaki’s cell phone. Her cell phone was equipped with a security function for children, allowing Jiro to find her location from an application on his device.

According to the log, Misaki had headed towards the Chikushi exit at Hakata Station after she left home last night. She went to Banba’s office. The log cut off after she left from there. The GPS was turned off then.



There was hard knocking on the office door.

“.....Who the hell is it? They’re loud.” Lin could not hear the television. He was trying to watch a drama and scowled in annoyance. “Hey, someone’s here.”

“I hear ya. I’m comin’.” Banba stood up from the sofa and went to open the door.

The one who had been knocking was Jiro.

"Huh? Jiro? What's the matter?" Banba's eyes widened when he saw his right arm. "No wait, what happened to your arm?!"

Jiro's right arm was wrapped in bandages in a triangular shape so he could not move it.

"What the hell happened?" Lin also walked over to the door.

"I had a bit of mishap on a job," Jiro replied. He was worked up as though hasty about something. He skipped over the details and changed the topic immediately. "There's something more important than that. Misaki has gone missing."

"Eh? Misaki is?"

"When I got home, she wasn't there. I saw she was near here when I looked through the GPS log, but it cut off shortly after that....."

"In any case," Banba prompted him to come inside. "Please, come in."

Once Jiro sat down on the reception chair, Banba told him everything that happened yesterday.

"Misaki did in fact come here yesterday. Said she ran away from home."

He then told him she left not long after she arrived. He had called her, and she told him she was heading home.

But Misaki did not go home. Maybe she had lied and went somewhere else instead. And she turned off her cell phone so she could not be tracked.

"So that's what happened. This isn't good." Jiro frowned worriedly. "Even though I thought I shouldn't let her get involved....."

"I'm sorry, Jiro." Lin spoke up. "If I didn't provoke her, she wouldn't have ran away from here."

After hearing the details of last night from Lin, Jiro shook his head.

".....No, it was my fault. I didn't know I was pressuring her so much that she would run away from home."

Regardless, they had to find Misaki. That informant may know something. Banba tried to call him. However-

“.....He’s not picking up.” No matter how many times he called him, Enokida did not pick up. It seemed his cell phone was turned off.

They tried contacting the other Tonkotsu Nine, but not a single person knew where Misaki was.

“What do we do?”

“The fastest way is to get in touch with Enokida-chan.....”

But he would not answer his phone. Yet they could not just wait around for him either.

“Let’s look for her.” Banba suggested.



Misaki felt like she met someone who truly understood her for the first time in her life. Although it may be licking each other’s own wounds, Misaki considered Méqué to be a vital existence to her. He was someone who had went through a similar experience as she did, someone who had been abused by his father. Because of that, she was able to tell him everything. She told him all the things her step-father did to her, everything she could not tell Jiro or the doctor. She was even able to tell Méqué a secret she kept hidden until now – of how her step-father occasionally touched her body, rubbing her genitals. She never spoke of it before, but she was able to reveal it to Méqué. She felt like a weight was lifted off her chest once she let everything out.

Likewise, Méqué told Misaki everything that happened to him. Everything with his father, the abuse, learning street performance, and growing up in an institution. And lastly he talked about his murders. He explained his tragic past all while keeping his usual creepy smile on his face. Misaki realized Méqué would smile when he was sad too.

They had talked for hours, and before they noticed it, it was already evening. No matter how much they could keep talking, they could not stay in this room forever. Jiro must be looking for her by now too.

“Méqué,” Misaki told him. “I have to go home soon. Everyone is probably worried about me.”

“You want to go home?”

Méqué’s complexion had changed. His smile disappeared from his face, and his sharp gaze shot right at her.

Misaki felt a chill run down her spine. She realized he could kill her. She felt like she could not tell him she wanted to go home again.

Misaki shook her head quickly. “That’s not it.”

“You mean it?”

“I mean it.” She could not upset Méqué. She forced a smile and nodded.

With her cell phone turned off, she could not contact anyone to save her. The door was locked, so she could not force her way outside.

But she may be able to have Méqué open the door and let her outside.

“But I’m tired of being here in this room. Let’s hang out somewhere else?”

“Hang out somewhere?”

She had an idea. “Méqué, let’s go to the Houjouya.”

She had to get outside somehow.

Méqué cocked his head at Misaki’s suggestion. “Hoh-joh-yah?”

He doesn’t know of Houjouya?

“It’s a festival. It’s packed with people and it’s a lot of fun. There’s a ton of shops too.”

Méqué’s eyes lit up. “Sounds fun.”

One more push.

“Let’s go there, Méqué. Together.”

After Méqué thought over it for a few moments, he stood up.

“Okay, let’s go.”

Misaki frowned. “.....You’re going to go dressed like that?”

Houjouya was one of Hakata’s three major festivals in the year where people show their affection for all life and appreciate the fruitful fall season. That was

what Jiro had told her before. From September twelfth to the eighteenth, street stalls would be set up on the road leading to Hakozaki Shrine, and the place would be bustling in activity from morning until night to the very last day.

Méqué drove his RV all the way to Hakozaki and parked at an open parking space. They then got out and walked over to the event. When they got to the event, they got excited by what they found: yakitori, fried potatoes, hot dogs, and crepes. There was also cotton candy, toffee apples, and familiar treats like *umegaemochi* and specialties like glasswork's Hakata Champon. They even saw foreigners selling tacos, kebabs, and Dondurma. There was more than just food too. People were enjoying themselves catching goldfish, koi carp, eels, and crayfish as well.

“.....This is Houjouya?”

Méqué said, glancing around the area. He wore his usual gaudy outfit, but he put on a mask to hide his face.

“Yep. Doesn't it look fun?” Misaki was relieved that they managed to get outside.

“Looks fun.” Méqué nodded in agreement. He seemed to have taken a liking to the event.

They proceeded down the narrow road lined with street stalls until they took a right and saw an ostentatious sign. It was a haunted house. There were children who were coming out of it sobbing.

A haunted house? Maybe I could use this, Misaki considered.

“Méqué, there's a haunted house.”

Misaki pointed to the sign.

Misaki thought they could go in the haunted house together and she could possibly break away from Méqué in the dark to get home.

“Hey, let's go in that haunted house. It looks fun.”

She tried her best to persuade him, but Méqué stubbornly refused. “.....No.”

“Why?”

“Ghosts are scary.”

Méqué looked at the female ghost’s scary face that was on the board and shook.

Misaki accidentally voiced her true thoughts seeing him behave like that. “..... You’re more frightening.”

Bottom of the Seventh Inning

“Oh? Looks like you still have free time, Sarucchi.”

On the basement level of the darts bar Lady Madonna, someone had called out to a man when he slouched back in a booth. There was only one man who would call him Sarucchi.

“.....What do ya got, Nao?”

Saruwatari replied to him still facing forward without turning to check the other’s face.

Nitta sat down across from him. “I found an interesting job for you since you were off.”

“An interesting job?” Saruwatari leaned forward. “You serious?”

“Totally am.” Nitta gave him his usual dubious smile. “Your target is a hitman in Fukuoka. Just like you wanted.”

“.....A hitman in Fukuoka?” A certain man’s face appeared in his mind. He leaned forward even more, intrigued. “Is it that stupid face guy?”

At that, Nitta smirked with a profound expression.

Saruwatari took a monorail to get to JR Kokura Station and then got on the limited express sonic train to Fukuoka, arriving to JR Hakata Station in a short amount of time. He met with his client at a coffee shop located near the station. Saruwatari entered the small shop and waited for his client to arrive while drinking his cola. He had heard the client was a young leader of a gang, but the man who walked in looked like any ordinary person. He had an air of a section manager for a general corporation.

Saruwatari addressed the man as he sat down across from him. “You’re

Sanjou from the Mutagawa Group? You don't look like a yakuza."

"I'm told that often." The other man returned a wry smile.

Sanjou looked at him as though evaluating him. "I told a mediator I know that I needed the most skilled hitman out there and was introduced to you."

Saruwatari's reputation had apparently reached as far as the next city over. It was not a bad feeling for him.

"I was told that while you were a well known hitman in Kitakyushu and were skilled, you could be difficult to handle at times."

And it seemed his bad reputation had reached there too.

When Saruwatari remained silent, Sanjou smiled. "Well, that doesn't matter to me. As long as you do your job, I won't have any complaints."

"Alright then. So? Who should I kill?"

When Saruwatari cut to the main topic, Sanjou gave him a halfhearted answer. "We don't really know who he is either."

Saruwatari frowned, perplexed.

"From what I heard from my subordinate, the man seemed to be a clown."

"A clown?" Saruwatari tutted hearing that. ".....It wasn't that stupid mask guy."

Sanjou explained the details. Earlier there was a group that was attacked during a business trade, and it could happen again. And the person behind those incidents was thought to be the man dressed as a clown, who had also attacked the Mutagawa Group the day before.

The Mutagawa Group was preparing to carry out an important business trade late tonight. They did not want any interruptions.

"So you want me to be your bodyguard?"

"Yes. You'll accompany us during the trade and kill anyone who shows up. It's a simple job, right?"

Saruwatari huffed in annoyance. It was going to be too easy. It did not matter who his opponent would be.

“Please come to this location tonight at ten. It’s our group’s warehouse. My subordinates will be waiting there for you.”

Sanjou told him, handing him a scrap of paper with the address written on it.

Saruwatari would meet Sanjou’s subordinates at the warehouse and get in the truck with their merchandise on it with them. Once they met up, they would head to the port. He would stand on watch for any enemy attacks while they transferred their smuggled goods. If an enemy tried to attack them, he would have to make a counterattack.

That was his client’s request.



They got the call from Sanjou when Kase’s car arrived at Hakozaki.

‘We got a hitman, so meet up at the warehouse.’ Sanjou instructed them.

“Understood.”

‘How is your end?’

Ishihara jerked when he was asked that. A cold sweat formed on his skin.

“Everything’s going perfectly.”

He lied. He did not report to Sanjou that one of the children died. They disposed of the body secretly.

“I’ll contact you again later.”

Ishihara hung up and got out of the car. They were a bit ways off from the event, but fortunately they had found an open parking space. They then headed to the event on foot.

“There’s a lot of people here.”

Kase stated while looking around the area.

“This is the last day of the event.”

Houjouya, being one of the main three festivals in Hakata, had people packed on the main road heading to the Hakozaki Shrine where it the event was held

at. Street stalls were set up along both sides of the road, illuminated by the street lamps. Since it was a weekday evening there were a lot of elderly people and few children, causing the kids that were present to stand out more. For them to capture one, Ishihara figured the best time was when school was out and it was turning from the evening into night, which would be about now.

“We just have to find any child that looks like they’re lost. Do what I instructed after that.”

Kase nodded at Ishihara’s order. “Understood.”

They split up to search for any children they could snatch.

After walking around for a bit, Ishihara spotted a boy who looked like he was in the lowest grade in elementary school. He seemed to have strayed from his parents and was wandering around, hunched over, while wiping tears from his face.

“Hey.”

When Ishihara called out to him, the child stopped and looked up at him.

“Where’s your mom?”

The child tilted his head, confused. So he was really lost.

“Let’s go look for her.”

The child nodded, gripping his outstretched hand tightly. They looked like a parent and child beside each other to other’s perspective. No one would be suspicious of him.

As to not let the child’s actual parents spot them, Ishihara took the child to the nearest vehicle.

He had the child breath in a drug in a blind spot to put him to sleep. Once the strength left the child’s body, he picked up his small frame. Ishihara returned to the parking space while pretending to carry his son who had fallen asleep from exhaustion. He purchased cotton candy to act as camouflage. He held a light blue bag with an anime character on it in his right hand and carried the child in his left, making no one even consider him to be a yakuza who had came here to abduct a child.

Once he got back to the car, he placed the boy into the back seat, fastening his seat belt. It had been an hour since they got here.

After a few minutes, he got a call. Thinking it was Sanjou, Ishihara felt a chill run through him. He looked at the screen and sighed. It was Kase. "What is it?"

'Where are you right now?'

"I'm in the car."

'Eh?' Kase exclaimed. 'You already got one? I'll hurry over.'

Kase stated and hung up.

An hour later, Kase appeared at the parking space, carrying a child.

"I'm sorry for being late."

Kase had kidnapped a short-haired girl.

"I hardly found any children walking by themselves."

He placed the sleeping child in the back seat like the other one and fastened the seat belt. Kase got into the driver's seat and started the car.

Now that they secured these two, they had six children in total. They had the amount they needed. However, that did not wipe away Ishihara's anxiety.

Ishihara pondered to himself. What would happen if another child dies? What if one of the children died from illness during transport? What if an accident happened and they would become useless as merchandise?

More concerns came to his mind the more he thought about it. The additional reasons for uneasiness gnawed at his mind. Maybe six was not enough. Ishihara glanced outside. At some point the sun had set, and the area around them had turned dark.

Abruptly, something had caught his eye, and he raised his voice.

"Hey, stop."

Kase did as he ordered and pulled over onto the side of the road.

"What is it?"

"Look," Ishihara pointed outside the window with his chin. "There's a kid."

A young girl around elementary school age was walking down the dark street by herself. She was the perfect prey for them to snatch up.

“This is perfect.” Ishihara smirked. “Let’s knab her.”

“Eh?” Kase voiced in surprise. “But didn’t we already catch the two we needed?”

“And what will we do if another dies? We’ll be put on the spot if we don’t have enough.”

They should have another one. Just in case.

Translation Notes:

There are some details I don’t think will be fully understood unless you are somewhat familiar with Japanese society and their social issues and/or laws. I brought up the issues of domestic violence and foster homes in Japan in the last section, but here are the main important details from [this article](#) again to better clarify what Shigematsu meant by the children not being completely safe unless the parents were completely out of the picture even if they were removed from them.

“Even in cases of serious, documented abuse it is very difficult to forcibly sever parental rights. (.....) The state can remove children and place them in orphanages, but if the biological parents find out where they are they can just walk in and drag them home. In some cases parents have laid in wait near school gates and abducted their children as they leave. Because the legal custody has not been severed there is little anyone can do.”

And if you find anything odd about Méqué’s care in the psychiatric institute, bear in mind mental health not only has a negative stigma to the general populace in Japan but treatment and care is generally poor too. [Japantimes](#) mentioned:

“One key problem is the, “megadose culture in psychiatric care.” Patients are kept sedated with massive doses of psychiatric drugs to pacify them, a situation partially due to chronic understaffing. According to these experts, this antediluvian approach fails to help these “quiet patients” and is symptomatic of wider problems.”

This isn't even limited to prescriptions; in general the more quiet patients get less care and attention. Also, I've seen a fair amount of news stories about mentally unstable people being discharged to commit crimes not long after their release over the years. And even excluding the few who did commit crimes upon their release, many of them still have trouble adjusting back to normal life more than other countries. On a lot of levels, Japan is very ill-equipped with handling people who need psychiatric care despite attempts being made to improve it.

And finally, with the cat's full name being Cromartie (which is a name of a football player by the way), his shortened name should be "Cro," but I kept it with Kuro because it's a pun. Kuro (black) is a common cat name in Japan. It's like calling a cat "blackie." Cromartie is read as kuromati (クロマテイ).

Eighth Inning

Top of the Eighth Inning

Several people were crowded at the game areas for target practice, strikeout practice, and archery. It was an exhilarating scene, typical of a festival.

“Méqué, let’s do that one.” Misaki pointed to a sign of one of the stands in the corner.

“What is it?”

“It’s darts.” She pulled Méqué’s arm, bringing him towards the stand. “If you win more than three hundred points, you could earn a prize.”

After waiting in line, their turn finally came around. They could throw five darts for 500 yen. Méqué paid for it.

Misaki picked up the dart and threw it at the target. However, she had missed. Or more accurately, it did not even hit the target. She made more attempts, but all of them missed.

“Let Méqué do it.”

Méqué said and took the last dart from Misaki’s hand. After he closely examined his target, he threw the dart in a fluid motion.

The dart struck in the white and black target, right in the dead center. He received 500 points for it.

“You’re something, mister.” The male running the stand had exclaimed. “Take whatever you would like out of these.”

The two looked in the area where the prizes were assorted. There were prizes which would make any child happy such as stuffed toys and toy guns. But Misaki was not interested in those.

“What do you think of this one?” Méqué held a small messenger bag.

“It’s cute.” It was very clearly a commodity designed for girls to use. “Méqué, you’ll use something looking like that?”

Méqué shook his head.

“Here,” he took the bag and put it around Misaki’s thin neck. “A present.”

“You’re going to give this to me?”

“Yeah.”

“.....Thank you.” When she expressed her gratitude, Méqué broke into a pleased smile.

Once they had left the games stands and passed under the torii archway, the area became even more immensely crowded. There was a throng of people gathered at the front of a stage. Méqué pointed over to it. “There’s something going on up there.”

Men dressed in flashy clothes were coming on and off the stage.

“It’s a magician!” Méqué exclaimed.

He had said he worked as a street performer. Perhaps he got excited whenever he saw a stage due to its relation with his occupation. Méqué pulled Misaki by the arm and steadily pushed forward through the crowd to get a better look at the stage.

There were various events that took place on this stage during Houjoya – from street performances to live bands and dance shows. Right now a magic show was about to begin. They got to the very front, and Méqué watched the stage in excitement.

“Now then, could I have assistance from someone in the audience?” The middle-aged magician wearing a silk hat was looking through the audience. He then spotted Misaki.

“You there, young miss.” The magician stepped off the stage and handed a pen and a piece of paper to Misaki. “Write your favorite number between one and nine on this paper, please.”

Misaki did not think over it long, considering it an annoyance she had got picked, and wrote the number one.

“What did you write?”

Misaki held up the piece of paper towards him.

“So it was one.” The magician looked around the audience and declared. “Truth is, I had predicted this young girl would write one beforehand.”

The magician pulled out a trump card from his breast pocket. It was a spade of ace.

There was an applause from the audience.

“Amazing! He got it!” Méqué voiced in surprise next to her. “Misaki, he read your mind!”

“.....How dull. Let’s go.”

Misaki turned on her heel while pulling at Méqué’s clothes, trying to get away from the mass of people around the stage. Méqué took the pen and paper from Misaki and stared at them closely. “Is this a magic pen? Or is this magic paper?”

“It’s a normal pen and normal paper.” Misaki gave a small sigh. “That was a beginner’s trick. He had trump cards for all the numbers hidden on his person. If I had written the number two, he probably would have pulled a trump out of his other pocket, right?”

“.....Really?” Méqué pouted when Misaki disclosed the secret behind the trick.

“Unlike street performing tricks, magic tricks have misdirections and set up.” Misaki tugged the shocked Méqué into the line to visit the shrine. “Come on, let’s worship at the shrine.”

“Worship?”

“It means to pray to the gods.”

After a few minutes, their turn had arrived. They threw in small change into the offertory box and clapped their hands.

I wish to always be with Jiro-chan.

Misaki whispered to herself in her mind, eyes closed.

Méqué imitated the same gestures beside her.



They split up to look for Misaki at any place that seemed likely she would go, including parks and libraries, but all were misses. The sun had set, so they all cut their investigation and met back at the detective office.

Just then, Banba received a call. 'Hello? Banba-san?'

It was Enokida's voice. He finally got back to them.

'It looks like you tried to call me a few times. Sorry, I didn't have any battery left after meeting with someone in a hospital.' Enokida explained. 'So? What's up? Did something happen?'

"Misaki is missin'."

'Ahhh,' Enokida muttered. He seemed to know something regarding her.

'Misaki-chan dropped by where I was yesterday. She wanted me to tell her where Jiro-san was at.'

"What time was that at?"

'When I called Jiro-san yesterday, it was at.....a little past nine.'

Misaki had arrived to his office at around eight thirty the night before. So Misaki must have left there and headed straight to Enokida.

"After that, where did Misaki head off to?"

'I assume she went after Jiro-san.Ah, don't tell Misaki-chan that I told you this. She forbade me to speak about it.'

"Then I need you to find where Misaki is right away."

'I put a transmitter in her pocket when I saw her yesterday. I'll look into it and track her.'

Banba stated his thanks before hanging up.



Jiro looked up at Banba and asked him when he got off the phone. "What did

Enokida-chan say?"

"Apparently Misaki went to Enokida-kun yesterday too. She asked him where you was."

Jiro had a sudden realization, recalling the call he got from Enokida the other night. He had asked him where he was. "Wait. Then that call was-"

"Seems like Misaki forbade Enokida-kun to speak."

"And he told her where I was?"

Banba nodded.

Jiro checked his call history. He got a call from Enokida around nine o'clock. He was attacked by the yakuza ten minutes later. If Misaki went by the Smokin' hot then there was a high possibility she had gotten in the mix of that assault.

"And where is she right now?" Lin asked.

"Enokida-kun said he's gonna look into it, so we gotta wait for him to call back."

Jiro made a deep exhale and held his head. "I didn't want her to help me with my work so this didn't happen....."

"It's the opposite." Banba objected. "It was 'cause she wanted to help ya that this happened."

Jiro frowned. ".....What do you mean?"

"I reckon' Misaki hated being' left out."

"Left out?" Lin questioned.

"That child has seen more of this world than others have. She's got a connection with us. She couldn't get into our circle, but neither could she return to normal life."

Misaki did not belong in neither the underground world that Jiro and Banba belonged to nor the outward world her classmates were in. She was left living in a small world where she always felt alienated, without anyone who would understand and relate to her by her side.

"She must've thought she had to do somethin'. Misaki tried to find her place

by fully pushin' into our world."

A thought tugged at Jiro's mind when he heard that. He had naively viewed her actions as part of a child's rebellious stage. But that was her desperation. Jiro was just desperate to protect her. He was frantic and tried to distance her from all the dangers his life entailed. But this was the result. If Jiro had realized her loneliness sooner, if he had tried to understand her, maybe this would not have happened.

"Get yourself together, Jiro." Banba patted Jiro's shoulder as he held his head and was turning pale a few times. "You're a parent; you gotta get yourself together."



At some point, the sky had turned dark. They walked down the street to the parking space while stuffing their faces full of the crepes they had bought at the food stalls.

It was a fun day. This may have been the first time in Misaki's life that she had played this much. Misaki had lost herself in the spirit of the festival.

"Houjouya was fun." Méqué stated before turning to her. "Where should we go next?"

Misaki instantly stopped when he asked her that, realizing she had entirely forgot her objective. She was having so much fun she had forgot that the man walking next to her was a serial killer who had kidnapped her. She came to the Houjouya event so she could get away from him. But instead of running away, she ended up hanging out with him.

It was not the festival's fault. This was the first time Misaki had ever went out with anyone else besides Jiro and the Ramens members. She was so happy, feeling like she had made a friend and a world of her own.

She was reluctant to leave now. Although he was a serial killer, she ended up wanting to hang out with him sometime again.

But she had to get home. She had to get back to Jiro.

When they arrived back to the parking space, Misaki spoke towards Méqué as he walked a few paces ahead of her.

“.....Hey, Méqué.”

He did not do any harm to her. Misaki knew he was truly a nice person.

And so he should understand if she told him. “I’m sorry.....I have to go now.”

“Go now?” Méqué was about to jump into the RV when he stopped and tilted his head at her. “Why?”

“Jiro-chan is going to worry about me if I don’t go home now.”

“Jiro-chan?”

“He’s my father.”

“Your father?”

Misaki quickly added. “Ah, no. He’s my nice dad.”

She then walked up to Méqué and squeezed his hand.

“You’ll let me if you’re my friend, right?”

She looked up at his face, staring him in the eye and stated, “please, Méqué, let me go home.”

After a few moments of silence, Méqué asked in a small voice. “.....Can Méqué see you again?”

“Of course.” Misaki nodded strongly. “I promise we will.”

Méqué had a sorrowful expression, but he nodded back. “.....Okay.”

He seemed to have understood. Misaki made a sigh in relief. “Thank you.”

Méqué took out a pen and paper from somewhere. They were from the magician earlier.

He wrote something down on the paper and handed it to Misaki, “here you go.”

A phone number was written on it. It must be his contact information. “With this, we can see each other again.”

"Okay. I'll definitely give you a call!"

Misaki promised and took the sheet of paper and put it in bag's pocket he had given her.

"See you later, Méqué. Let's hang out again sometime!" Misaki waved.

Méqué got in the car. He poked his head out of the driver's seat and waved back. "See you later, Misaki."

The car sped off.

Misaki continued to wave as the red box car grew smaller into the distance. After waving goodbye to Méqué, Misaki left the parking area. She decided she could take the subway. It would take her at least twenty minutes on foot to get to the Hakozaki shrine station.

After she walked for a few minutes, a car pulled over next to her.

"Sorry miss. Do you have a moment?" A man poked his head out of the window and called out to her. "We're lost."

They could be bad adults.

Misaki glared at the man, weary. She could see children over his shoulder. There was a boy around elementary school age sleeping in the passenger's seat. Perhaps he was his son.

So just a parent and child?

They really seemed to be lost. Misaki let her guard down and took a step towards them. And when she did, the back door had opened; another man lept out at her.

It was so sudden she was slow to react in time. Misaki braced herself, taken by surprise, but the man grabbed her.

"Let me go!"

Misaki yelled.

"Be quiet." The man held Misaki down as she tried to struggle and closed his hand over her mouth.

She could not speak. Misaki desperately resisted in an attempt to break free.

As she struggled against him, her bag slipped off her shoulder.

The man easily picked up Misaki and dragged her into the car.



They got a call from Enokida. He told him that when he looked into her movements, she had been wandering around Hakozaki Shrine. And now not far from there, she had suddenly stopped moving.

Jiro and the rest of them got into the car as fast as they could and headed to where she was. However-

“She’s not here.”

They did not see Misaki anywhere.

They were at an alley. It was wide enough for one vehicle to pass through, but with the lack of street lamps it was pitch black. Since it was a little ways off from the festival, not many cars or people passed by here.

“Hey, Jiro,” Lin spoke up. “Look at this.”

He picked up a red bag that was on the ground and handed it to Jiro. It was unfamiliar to him. It was not Misaki’s. However, when they looked inside it, they had found a child’s use cell phone.

“.....It’s Misaki’s.”

Jiro immediately called Enokida. He changed the settings to speaker so Banba and Lin could listen in on it too. “Misaki wasn’t here. But we found her cell phone fallen on the ground.”

That was not all. A half-eaten crepe was also on the ground. It must have been stepped on as its insides were splattered out. When they carefully searched the area they found a redback spider shaped device – it was the transmitter Enokida had planted on her. It had fallen off her person.

Misaki had came to the Houjouya festival. And she was attacked by someone here.

“Can you look at surveillance footage?” Lin asked.

‘There aren’t any installed around there.’ Enokida then added. ‘But there are cameras on both ends of the road, so the culprit may have been caught on them. Give me a second.’

Enokida said, probably so he could work on his computer. After a few minutes, he spoke again, having found a car coming from that alley. ‘I found a vehicle come out of that alley around the time Misaki’s tracker had stopped moving. I was able to see the plate number clearly on it.’

“Who’s car is it?”

Enokida replied. ‘A man named Kase.’

“Who’s that?”

‘An employee working for the Mutagawa Group. Bottom of the bottom. He had a past criminal record.’

“The Mutagawa Group?”

Jiro felt dizzy. The Mutagawa Group were the ones he had encountered in the bar the other day. So after he had escaped from their grasp, they turned their sights on Misaki. “.....It’s my fault.”

Banba patted Jiro’s back to comfort him before asking Enokida. “Where was that car headin’?”

‘Following the surveillance cameras, it looks like they’re heading east.’

“East?” Lin cocked his head. “To the man’s home? Or his workplace?”

‘Neither of them. Both are in the opposite direction.’

“Then where’s that car-”

‘It’s heading to a warehouse owned by the Mutakata Group.’

Lin muttered.

“What’s the address?”

‘I’ll send it to you now.’

And Enokida hung up. After a few moments, they got an e-mail from Enokida. The location was attached to the message. When they opened it, a map

appeared with the place in question marked.

"Jiro," Banba addressed him. "Let's get goin'."

Jiro nodded.

"Yes, let's go." To save his daughter.



Misaki glanced around the area she was in with only her eyes. She was in a vast room with a pile of cardboard boxes stacked along the walls. She was probably in a warehouse.

Misaki curled up into a ball, holding her knees close to herself in the small cage she was in. There were similar large dog cages near her with elementary school boys and girls around the same age as her inside them. Some were sobbing while others were trembling in fear, curled in on themselves. Their anxiety, fear, and loneliness seeped into her, and Misaki shook her head to steady herself.

I have to get it together.

She lightly smacked her cheeks to restore her wits.

I'm not like the other children. I'm not like the children who weep and shake in fear. I'm the daughter of an avenger. This much won't unhinge me. This is nothing.

She told herself before turning her focus to the situation at hand. What was most important was knowledge. She needed information on her captor and her situation.

Misaki pondered to herself. What was their objective? She thought back to what had happened to her. She was kidnapped by two men on her way back from Houjouya. She then was taken to this warehouse and locked into a cage. There was a slightly dirty blanket in the cage. It must be for her to use to keep warm. No one would provide a blanket to the children they planned to kill. So she was left alive intentionally, at least for the meantime.

Misaki took out one of her hair ties and tossed it away from the cage through

the bars, leaving evidence she was here in case something happened to her.

“Yes, everything is proceeding smoothly. There are no issues on are end. We have plenty just in case anything happens.”

She heard a man speaking. He was the person who pretended to be lost and asked her for directions. He was talking on the phone at the moment. Misaki strained her ears to eavesdrop the conversation.

“We have the merchandise ready for transport in the warehouse right now. We just have to put them on the truck.”

The man then hung up.

After a few minutes, the shutter opened and a truck came inside. A young man showed his face from the driver’s seat. He was familiar to Misaki. He was the one who leapt out of the back seat of the car and caught her.

“Ishihara-san, we got to borrow the truck from the Yamazaki company.”

“Alright. Let’s get them on.”

“Understood.”

So that’s what’s going on, Misaki thought. The man had glanced over to them when he mentioned the term ‘merchandise.’ They were the merchandise, meaning their objective was child human trafficking. And the truck was their means of transport. They were going to be put on it soon. They would be brought to another land and be sold somewhere.

If she got put on the truck, that would be the end.

The two men lifted the cages with the children inside them and put them on the load-carrying tray on after the other. One, then two, three, four. Misaki heard the children’s wailing as they were put inside the truck.

Her turn was approaching. There was no time.

Then she had to stall for time.

To follow what Jiro had taught her, she first needed to gain their attention. She had to get their focus on her, even as long as a second, just enough to remain here.

“Hey, mister!”

The man named Ishihara turned to face Misaki when she yelled at him. “..... What is it?”

“Mister, are you part of the yakuza?”

“Ah?” Ishihara’s eyes widened. “What did you say just now?”

“You’re part of the yakuza, right? Ishihara-san.”

“Why do you know my name?”

“That’s what the other guy called you.”

Ishihara seemed to have lost interest for a moment and had muttered, “you got good ears.” He turned away from Misaki while blowing out smoke.

“This is human trafficking, isn’t it?”

At that, Ishihara whipped back around. He fully turned to face Misaki, eyes wide.

I got him. Success.

Misaki smirked.

Ishihara’s complexion drastically changed.

Bottom of the Eighth Inning

“This is human trafficking, isn’t it?”

Those words he never expected to hear from a child struck him in his core.

“.....What did you say?”

Ishihara was taken aback.

It was exactly as she stated; they were doing human trafficking. They were going to put the children on a ship and send them overseas to their client. They had repliminished the number of children they had lost as well. They were able to fix their situation for the plan to go smoothly.

This was beyond Ishihara’s expectations. A child who knew of their organization’s secret was smiling in front of him. Ishihara instantly felt

impatience take hold and he grew anxious.

Did I mess up somewhere?

He thought back on his actions up until now. No, there should not have been any problem.

Then why does she know? Who is this kid?

Imagining one unexplained scenario after the other, he began to get irritated.

“So I am right,” the girl grinned up at him when he fell silent.

Although she was kidnapped, she did not show an ounce of fear. This child was not normal.

“.....Why would a damn kid like you know that?”

“Oh, I wonder.”

The girl gave him a suggestive look unfitting of a child.

What an unsettling kid.

People feared the unknown. And Ishihara could not handle not knowing the truth. The time for the trade was approaching, but he could care less at the moment. He could not think of anything else but the desire to uncover this child’s background.

Ishihara walked over to the girl and kicked her cage. There was a loud metallic clang.

“Don’t you look down on me, you fucking kid.”

Kase hastily called out to him. “Wait, Ishihara-san. What will happen if you damaged the merchandise!?”

“This one isn’t going to be merchandise.”

Ishihara talked back in a growl.

“Leave this kid behind.”

“Eh?”

“We have six already. There’s no issue if we lose one.”

“That’s true, but.....But where are you going to take her?”

“That’s a thought.” Ishihara contemplated. He did not want his superior to know an unexpected situation took place. He could not bring her in to the organization. “I’ll take her to my house.”

No matter how much he had yelled at his son or how much his son had wailed when he hit him, he never got any complaints. Noise level was not an issue at his home.

“I’ll leave the rest to you. That hitman is going to be here soon. Meet up with him and bring the merchandise to the ship.” Ishihara pointed at the children with his chin. “I’m going to make this kid tell me everything.”



“It wasn’t the stupid mask guy!”

When Saruwatari called Nitta up and yelled at him, Nitta feigned ignorance. ‘Eh? What are you talking about?’

“The hitman I’m assigned to kill! It’s not the stupid mask guy!”

Sanjou told him it was a clown. Although the Niwaka Samurai had an extraordinary look, he would not disguise himself as a clown.

‘I never once said it was going to be the Niwaka Samurai.’ Saruwatari heard Nitta’s laughter. ‘You just assumed, Sarucchi.’

Shit, Saruwatari cursed and hung up. He wanted to smash the device against the ground, but he managed to stop himself before he nearly did. He put his cell phone back in his pocket as he looked up at the building in front of him.

Saruwatari went to the location provided to him at the time the Mutagawa Group wanted. There was a transport truck parked in front of the warehouse.

“.....You’re finally here.” A young man poked his face out of the driver’s seat and pointed to the passenger’s seat with his thumb. “Get in.”

“Don’t give me directions.” Saruwatari tutted. “I’ll kill you.”

Once he got in the passenger's seat, they took off. The young man was called Kase. He was a lackey in the lowest position in the Mutagawa Group.

"We can never expect when the enemy will attack," Kase then commented profoundly. "So don't let your guard down, hitman."

"I believe I told you to not order me around."

Saruwatari warded him off as he put on his seat belt.

Ninth Inning & Tenth Inning

Top of the Ninth Inning

“I’m going to floor it, so put on your seat belts.”

And just as Jiro stated, he slammed on the acceleration pedal; the minivan the three were in lurched off and sped down the street.

“Whoaa,” the other two exclaimed when Jiro made a sharp left turn. Banba and Lin were thrown to the right from the motion.

“.....He’s drivin’ crazy.” Banba muttered next to Lin. He was using his Japanese sword as a means to support himself against the car’s jerking motions.

They were almost at their destination, one road away from the Mutagawa Group’s warehouse.

In just a few minutes, an old squared building came into view – it was the warehouse.

“A truck is coming.”

The truck that was parked in front of the warehouse just took off and was heading towards them.

“Grab a hold onto something.”

Jiro ordered, re-adjusting his grip on the steering wheel. Lin questioned him. “Hey, what are you-”

“Quiet and brace yourself.”

The next second, Jiro had sharply swung the wheel to the side. The minivan swerved to its side and came to a stop, blocking the road. Once they regained their balance after being flung around from the motion, they looked out the window to see the truck was speeding towards them.

“Oh no-”

“They’re going to crash into us!”

Banba and Lin braced themselves for the collision. The truck had put on its

emergency brakes, making a high pitched screech. Fortunately, the truck did not hit them. It had managed to stop in time, narrowly missing Jiro's van.

".....I thought we was gonna die."

Banba exhaled.

Lin nodded next to him. "My lifespan just got shortened."

If they had gotten hit, it would have been over. They would have been stuck in the car, unable to escape the collision.

"Misaki!" Jiro yelled, opening the door and rushing out of the car. Lin and Banba quickly followed suit.

Since they had blocked the road, they had expected the driver to be yelling at them, but an unexpected development awaited them. The door on the passenger's side had opened, and a man came out of it. He landed on the ground nimbly and sauntered over to them, smiling.

"We meet again, stupid mask face."

It was a familiar voice.

It was *that* hitman.

"Geh," Banba grimaced.

"You again!?" Lin scowled as well and yelled back. "You're always getting in our way. Are you a stalker!?"

"Huh? Hell no."

Saruwatari frowned.

"So why are you here?" Banba stepped in front of Lin, holding his weapon in his right hand. At that, Saruwatari pointed to the driver with his thumb.

"I was hired by them. They said they were being targeted by a hitman, but you were involved too?"

"Hey!" The driver of the truck yelled at Saruwatari when he conversed carefree with the enemies. "What the hell are you doing? Kill them already!"

"I'm gonna do that now," Saruwatari glared back at the man. "Don't order me

around.”

He then turned back to them and brandished his ninja sword.

“Leave this fella to me.” Banba re-adjusted his grip on his sword and instructed Lin and Jiro in a low voice. “Hurry up. Get Misaki.”

“Alright. Got it.”

“Don’t get killed.”

Leaving Banba to face that hitman, Lin and Jiro dashed over to the driver’s side. Once they pulled the man out of there, Lin took out his knife and pressed it against his neck. “If you do as we ask, we’ll let you live.”

“Hey, hitman!” The man shouted for Saruwatari, seeking help. “Hitman! Kill these guys!”

Saruwatari turned to face him, annoyed. “Huh? I’m not in the position to do that right now.”

“Haa?” The man’s eyes widened at his refusal. “Don’t kid with me! What will happen if I die?”

“Then go die.”

No matter how hard the man wailed for help, Saruwatari paid no heed. He was completely focused on Banba.

“Where is Misaki?” Jiro drew close to the driver.

“Misaki?”

“The child you kidnapped!”

Jiro took out a gun with his uninjured arm and pointed it at the man.

“I-I don’t know.”

Just then, they suddenly heard voices coming from inside the truck. It was the sound of children crying. Jiro pressed his ear against the vehicle and figured she must be in there.

The door to the back of the truck was locked.

Jiro placed his finger on the finger and ordered. “Open it up. Now!”

“As if I could do that! They’re important merchandise!”

There was a gunshot. Gunpowder smoke emitted from the gun barrel. Jiro had shot the man.

“Ow, shit.....!”

The man staggered, having been injured in his right leg.

“Next will be your other leg.”

“I got it! I got you!”

The man broke down and raised both his hands in defeat. He unlocked the door as instructed and opened the doors wide. There were six dog cages inside the truck. Each one had an elementary school kid locked up inside.

“This is horrific.....”

Jiro frowned at the scene.

Lin looked at the children inside the cages and tutted. It was like they were livestock. “.....Human trafficking?”

The man had mentioned they were important merchandise, meaning they had intended to sell these children off somewhere.

“Ah, you,” Lin saw a child he recognized among them. “You’re Rena Aikawa, right?”

She was the daughter of Mari Aikawa – their client who got murdered. Lin did not expect to find her here.

“Misaki!” Jiro climbed into the back and searched for his daughter. “Misaki! Where are you!?”

“.....She’s not here.”

Out of all the children inside the cages, Misaki was missing.

“Where is Misaki!?” Jiro yelled. He stalked up to the driver again and thrust the gun against him.

“I don’t know,” the man shook his head.

If she was not here, maybe she was locked inside the warehouse.

“Let’s check inside.”

They threatened the man to give them the key for the side entrance of the building and entered the warehouse. Only silence greeted them. They did not feel any person’s presence inside. They called Misaki’s name, but there was no response.

After Jiro looked around inside, he whispered. “.....There’s no one here.”

The warehouse only had a pile of cardboard boxes. Inside them were guns and bullets as well as white powder in vinyl bags and syringes.

Jiro walked around further.

“This is-”

He spotted something on the ground. It was a hair tie. It looked like Misaki’s.

There was no doubt that Misaki was here. She had left proof behind for them.

The two walked out of the warehouse and questioned the man again.

“Where’s Misaki? She was here, wasn’t she?”

“.....Yeah,” the man finally seemed to have recalled her. “She was the weird kid.”

“Where is she!?”

There were gunshots again. This time there were three.

“Hee!” The man shrieked and bent over, covering his head.

At this rate Jiro may kill him. Now that Jiro had lost his cool, Lin took over the interrogation. “Where is the weird kid?”

“Sh-she was taken by Ishihara-san.”

“And who’s Ishihara?”

“He’s from the same organization as me.”

“Where did he take her?”

“I don’t know!” The man yelled.

Lin could tell he was lying. He pressed his knife to the man’s throat. “Why would he take her?”

"That kid seemed to know something on us.....Ishihara-san said he was going to get it out of her."

Jiro and Lin exchanged glances. By 'get it out of her,' he meant torturing her? If that was the case, then they needed to save her quickly.

"Do you think he took her to their base?"

"No," Lin shook his head. "There's no way someone would bring a kid into their gang's hideout."

"I suppose so."

"Then that leaves.....his home?" Lin stared at the man with a side glance, carefully observing him. The man had a marginal reaction when he said that. It seemed Lin had hit the mark.

"Where does Ishihara live?"

When Jiro pressed the man for answers, he shook his head. "I don't know."

It did not seem he was lying this time.

"What is his first name?"

"Hiroshi. Hiroshi Ishihara."

Jiro started a call, planning to have Enokida look into him. He talked with him for a while, but after he hung up he shook his head in defeat.

"It's a common name, so there are too many guys with the exact same first and last name. He did say he could cross some off by age, address, occupation and past criminal offenses from the list to find anyone who could be correlated with the Mutagawa Group....."

But even then, they would still have more than ten people. There were too many. They did not have the time to check up with each one.

".....Hiroshi Ishihara."

Lin whispered his name.

"Hiroshi Ishihara, he said?"

Lin had a realization.

"The name of the man who took her was Hiroshi Ishihara, right?"

"Yes." The man replied.

The name Hiroshi Ishihara was familiar to Lin.

'Hey, did you know? Ishihara-san in room 408 is apparently a yakuza member of the Mutagawa Group.'

Now that Lin thought about it, he had heard a talkative housewife mention that when they were going around asking people for information on Rena Aikawa's case earlier.

".....Hey, Jiro," Lin considered the possibility. "I think I know where he lives."



Misaki managed to avoid being put on the truck by provoking Ishihara. Although she was able to escape human trafficking, that did not change her situation. Once Ishihara bound her limbs, he put her in his car and drove her off somewhere. They were heading towards an old apartment building. Ishihara picked Misaki up by her waist and snuck onto the elevator with her while avoiding being seen by onlookers. They got off on the fourth floor, and she was brought to the furthest apartment on the floor.

".....Welcome home."

She heard a child's voice. A boy greeted Ishihara as he took off his shoes at the entrance. The boy's eyes widened when he saw Misaki. "Who is this girl?"

"You're in the way. Move."

Ishihara shoved the boy aside and proceeded down the hallway. He headed towards the bathroom.

Ishihara turned on the faucet and began to fill the tub.

".....This is for daring to talk smack to me."

He tore off the tape covering Misaki's mouth and lifted her up.

"I'm not letting you off easy even if you start crying, you shitty kid."

In the next moment, her small body was thrown into the bathtub.

There was a splash of water, and her clothes started to sodden. The cold water spread all around her as she was pushed to the bottom of the tub.

Her limbs were still tied, making her unable to move. She attempted to rise to the surface, but her head was pushed back down from above her. She could not breath. Water was seeping into her mouth and nose.

It hurt.

Air was escaping her through her mouth.

It hurt.

Just as she thought she was at her limit, the man's arm reached out to her, grabbing her by the collar and pulling her up.

"Gha, kwah, ga-ha."

Misaki coughed, spitting out water. She heaved, sucking in air as much as she could.

"Come on. Tell me."

The man questioned her, drawing close to her face.

"Who are you? Tell me." He yelled and shook Misaki.

".....I won't."

Misaki would not tell him. She could not.

I'll protect Jiro-chan.

The man grew angrier when she glared back at him and shouted.

"You shitty kid!"

Misaki was assaulted by water once more. Ishihara held Misaki's head and pushed it into the bathtub.

It hurt. She could not breath again. Water went up her nose, and she grimaced from the sharp pain underwater. Misaki tried her best to hold her breath so she would not waste air.

A few seconds later, the man's hold on her weakened. She was pulled out of the water before being submerged again. Ishihara repeated the process

multiple times.

But regardless, Misaki would not cave in. She would endure whatever he would do to her.

“Gha, ha, ah,” Misaki stated as she regulated her rigid breathing. “.....I won’t tell you a single thing.”

The man increased his pressure against Misaki’s head, fuming. He was going to put her under the water again, when-

“Dad.”

They heard a reserved voice from outside the bathroom. It was the boy from earlier.

Ishihara stopped and clicked his tongue. “.....What is it?”

“Someone’s here.”

They heard the sound of the intercom ringing. Ishihara tutted once more before walking out of the bathroom. His footsteps drew farther away.

Now was her chance.

The ropes binding her had loosened while she had thrashed around. Misaki undid her bonds and slipped out of the bathtub. She had to get out of there before the man came back.

When she was about to get out into the hallway –

“That was just a religious solicitator. Don’t bother me over every little thing.” Misaki heard the man’s voice drawing closer. “If someone comes, just say I’m not here.”

This isn’t good. He’s coming back.

If she stayed there the man would find her. Misaki quickly went into the Japanese style room in front of the bathroom and hid inside the closet.

She brought her knees to her chest and held her breath.

“Hiding is useless.”

Hearing a voice just outside the sliding screen, she jumped.

He found me. Misaki braced herself.

She had completely forgotten that she was drenched. The man could easily find out where she was by tracking the drips of water.

The sliding door abruptly opened with a snap.

“Get the hell out here!”

Ishihara howled, glaring at her. He reached out and grasped her ankle roughly, trying to pull her out.

It was the same as back then. Abruptly, memories from the past arose before her. The menacing look Ishihara overlapped with her step-father’s from four years ago.

She was assaulted by fear double-fold and felt tears forming. She was shaking.

Misaki ground her teeth and fought the sensation head on.

She had to resist. She got onto her own feet and bit into the man’s arm. *I’m going to bite it off.* Misaki bit harder into his arm.

“Ow, you shit!” Ishihara shouted, withering in pain. “How dare you-”

Ishihara snapped and attacked her. He struck her in the face, causing her to stumble back from the force. Unable to retaliate, she collapsed onto the tatami floor. Misaki curled up into a ball and raised her arms to protect her head, shielding herself from the blows and grounded her teeth.

“You fucking-!”

Ishihara raised his fist when he suddenly stopped.

The intercom was ringing again. Someone had arrived. It was being rung persistently. It would not stop no matter how much it was ignored.

“.....What is it now?” Ishihara shouted, clicking his tongue. “Hey, you go check!”

“I’ll go now,” Misaki heard his son’s weak voice reply back immediately.

Ishihara turned his focus back onto Misaki and grabbed her by the hair.

“.....Goddammit, you’re being a pain in my ass.”

When he lifted up her face, blood poured from her nose. A blood vessel must have burst when she got punched a second ago. The blood dripped onto the tatami floor, staining it.

“Come on, tell me.” Ishihara laughed. He had a triumphant expression as though he thought he had won. He must feel proud, believing he had control over a child through violence. *What an idiot*, Misaki thought. This man and her step-father were all idiots.

I don't want to lose to a stupid adult like him.

Misaki glared at the man in front of her and stated. “.....Do you think I'd be scared just because you hit me?”

The man scowled at her. “What did you say?”

“This is nothing.”

I'm not like the normal kids. I won't cry just by getting punched. I won't weaken. I'm not scared at all even if this stupid adult tries to intimidate me.

“I've had an abundance of real life experience with this.” Misaki smirked at him while wiping the blood off her face with the back of her hand. “It's not like I went through abuse at four years old for show.”

Ishihara's complexion changed.

“You shitty kid,” he raised his arm once more. “I'm gonna kill you!”



Lin and Jiro left Banba behind and headed over to Ishihara's place. It was at an apartment building near the park Lin and Banba were investigating at earlier, in room 408. It was the middle of the night, but nonetheless they hit the intercom button. There was no reply, so they kept ringing it repeatedly. After a few moments, the one who appeared was not Ishihara but a boy. He must have been Ishihara's son.

“Good evening, young boy,” Jiro spoke before the other could. He lacked his usual courtesies. “Is your father in?”

“.....He's not.”

“Are you alone?”

The boy nodded.

“But it sure is loud in there.” Lin had his focus towards the inside of the room. They could hear a man yelling, ‘you shitty kid,’ and ‘I’m gonna kill you.’

“I’m sorry to intrude.”

Jiro said in manner where the other could not consent to nor refuse to. Intimidated by his threatening demeanor, the boy let them inside.

They headed towards the direction of the shouts and found themselves at a Japanese style room.

“I’m going to kill you for looking down on me!”

They heard that yell from inside.

When they opened the door, Misaki was there.

She was in a terrible state. She was entirely soaked, and her face was covered in blood from being hit. The man had gotten on top of her and was about to throw another punch.

The moment Jiro saw the scene, he snapped.

“You bastard,” he shouted. “What the hell are you doing to my daughter!?!?”

Jiro’s dominant arm whipped out of its bandaged sleeve and formed a fist high above his head. His left hand grabbed the man by the collar, and he used his injured right hand to punch the man square in the face.

Jiro struck the man over and over while making a beastly roar. They heard the sound of skin tearing and bones snapping. The man’s face swelled up and his nose became bent. Jiro’s fist was caked in the man’s blood that gushed out of his nose.

The man had lost consciousness. But regardless, Jiro did not stop. Lin watched him as he lost himself to anger and kept pounding the man in a daze. He was overwhelmed seeing the intensity behind his rage.

After a while, Jiro’s right arm began to bleed. Seeing that, Lin quickly intervened. “.....Hey, you can stop now. You’re opening your wound.”

Jiro was so menacing that even Lin hesitated to draw close to him.

Jiro's wound had fully opened. He was so worked up that he did not even notice the pain. After he had tossed the man aside, he took in deep breaths to regulate his breathing. Jiro returned to himself in the next moment.

“.....Misaki!”

He rushed over to Misaki who was lying on her side.

She immediately lept into Jiro's chest. “Jiro-chan!”

“Ahhh, I'm so sorry. I must have scared you.” Jiro held Misaki tightly. “I'm sorry. I'm so sorry to have scared you.”

“I'm okay.....I'm fine.”

Misaki wrapped her arms around to Jiro's back and repeated.

“I wasn't scared.....I wasn't scared at all.....!”

‘I wasn't scared.’ ‘I'm okay.’ Misaki wailed as she repeated those words, trembling.

How much fear had she been exposed to? Lin pondered nervously. He had not known her for long, but this was the first time he had seen her like this. What she just went through should have been a terrifying experience.

But Misaki was trying to be strong. She was trying to be the avenger's daughter. For Jiro's sake.

Lin stared at the two as they embraced each other.

This is a family.

That thought passed through his mind.

Even after Misaki had fallen asleep from crying and exhaustion, Jiro still kept a firm hold on her. They returned to the van and laid her small body onto the backseat. Misaki was sound asleep. She must have relaxed as soon as she saw Jiro's face.

Lin got into the passenger's seat.

“Is it alright?” He glanced over to Jiro in the driver's seat. “Your arm.”

The bandages were completely red.

“Yes,” Jiro looked at his injured arm and gave a wry smile. “Compared to the pain she went through, this is nothing.”

The van slowly took off.

Jiro held the steering wheel with one hand and stated. “.....I’ve made my decision.”

“For what?”

“I’m going to let her go. I’m going to put her up for adoption.”

There was a strong conviction behind his tone of voice.

At this point, his resolve probably would not waver now.

“I see.....that’s unfortunate.”

It could not be helped though. It was the conclusion Jiro thought of. And besides, after seeing Misaki get in that state – beaten up and firmly trying to act strong – there was no way he could keep her around. No matter how mature she behaved, she was still an elementary school girl. Jiro did not want to put Misaki through all that pain a second time. It was natural for him to think that way. If Lin was in the same position as Jiro, he would have made the same decision of entrusting her to a normal household.

But it did not change the fact that they were family.

“.....So you did know after all.” Lin muttered.

“What did I know?”

“Tips on raising a child.”

Jiro’s breath caught in his throat.

“She gave it her all. She did amazing.” Lin looked outside the window after glancing at Misaki in the backseat. “She’s definitely your daughter.”

“.....Thank you.” Jiro replied back in a small voice.

After a few minutes of driving, Jiro suddenly recalled. “That reminds me. Is Banba-chan alright?”

Their fight had probably reached a conclusion by now. Lin answered while still facing towards the window. "He's probably fine."

Bottom of the Ninth Inning

"Hey!"

A voice called out to them, stopping their attacks. *It was just getting to the good part*, Saruwatari tutted.

The young man from the Mutagawa Group approached them while dragging his injured leg. "What the hell are you doing?!"

".....Ah?" Saruwatari glared at the man.

"Because of you, the plan completely fell through!" Kase yelled and pointed at Banba. "Hurry up and kill him already!"

"How many times do I have to say to not order me around until you get it!?"

Saruwatari snapped and before he realized it, he had sunk his fist into Kase's face.

"Ahhh," Kase yelped and fell onto the ground, motionless. He had lost consciousness.

Now there was no one to interfere. Saruwatari could fight the other man to his heart's content. He looked over to the man in front of him and smirked.

Banba glanced over to the truck."I'm worried about them children. Can I call an ambulance?"

"Sure, whatever."

Once Saruwatari gave him his approval, he took out his cell phone and made a call. "Ahh, hello? Shigematsu-san? I found a truck with children inside it, so could ya come check 'em out? Ah, and send an ambulance. We're at—"

After telling the other the details, he hung up with, "okay. Thanks." He then turned to face Saruwatari. "He said they're gonna get here in ten minutes."

That was no issue. "Then let's finish this in one."

Saruwatari held up his ninja sword once more.

The match resumed.

Saruwatari grinned and swung up his sword. The two quickly closed the distance between each other. Their blades clashed with a metallic clang. Saruwatari then bent over to push away from his opponent's blade. The other man took a step back to correct his posture. He then stepped forward, thrusting the tip of his Japanese sword at him. Saruwatari took out shuriken from his pocket and threw them with agile speed. One missed. However, the second one had fine trajectory, flying at Banba's face. The other knocked the black object aside, using his scabbard. He then threw the scabbard at Saruwatari.

The moment Saruwatari dodged the scabbard he felt a presence behind him. In an instant Banba had gotten around him. Saruwatari made a half rotation and swung his sword. Banba's blade blocked the blow in the last second.

“.....You’re good.”

“You as well.”

The two grinned at each other before distancing themselves once more.

Now how should I take him next?

Just as he adjusted his grip on his sword, Banba abruptly exclaimed. “Oh, would you look at this?”

He glanced down at his wrist watch and made a provocative smile.

“Looks like more than a minute has passed.”

“.....Shut your trap.”

Just then, they heard the faint sound of sirens from police cars and ambulances in the distance. *They’re here already?* Saruwatari tutted. The sound was drawing closer. They could not stick around for much longer.

“I’ll finish it with this.”

Saruwatari raised a four-sided shuriken and glared at his opponent. He had used all his other ninja weapons, and only had that one left.

“We have a one point difference on our score. It’s the bottom of the ninth inning with two outs and bases loaded – a full count.”

The infield and outfield were drawn-in. The next pitch would decide the game.

"If you get three strikes, I win. If you make a hit, you win."

"Fine by me," Banba grinned as well. He gripped his sword with both hands and rose it high into the air, as though wielding a bat. "Give me your best shot."

The match would be settled on this one pitch.

Saruwatari began to make the motion to pitch. He took a large step forward and bent over, releasing the black object mere centimeters from the ground.

It was not a straight ball; it was a sinker. Saruwatari would get him to miss with this pitch.

It was the same as last time they had fought. The shuriken was set to veer off and strike the batter in the leg.

However, immediately after Saruwatari released the shuriken he realized something:

Banba's stance was different.

Banba would take the stance of a right handed batter, facing the pitcher from his left side. Instead, Banba took up the opposite position. He had his right side facing Saruwatari, taking the stance of a left-handed batter.

When did he become a double-sided batter?

Banba swung his sword in front of the stunned Saruwatari. He outstretched his arms and struck the shuriken, managing to hit it towards where the mitt would be. He was able to hit back the shuriken with a curved trajectory a batter would normally evade – back to the pitcher.

The shuriken was flying back at Saruwatari's face. He moved instantly, but he was unable to fully dodge it. The shuriken grazed his cheek and struck the truck behind him.

He was able to hit it.

Saruwatari was dumbfounded.

The pitch he put everything into was sent back to him. He was unable to

respond to it at all.

“Alright!”

Banba raised his fist slightly.

“That’s my win.” He rested his sword against his shoulder, making a triumphant expression.

“Shit,” Saruwatari cursed quietly.

He did not expect it would be sent back to him. The man must have made a plan to counter it since they last fought. “You can’t use the same trick twice.” Banba smirked.

“.....Shut it.”

The sirens were coming closer. They had to get out of there quickly.

Saruwatari picked up his ninja sword and turned on his heel. “I’m going to win next time. Remember that.”

Top of the Extra Tenth Inning

A week passed since Misaki’s abduction.

The bruise on her face the man had given her had finally swelled down, and she resumed her normal activities. It would be more accurate to say Jiro made her go back to her normal activities. They did not have much time left.

The wound on his right arm had still not healed fully, but the swing was taken off. He glanced at his watch. It was eleven AM.

Jiro stood in front of a family restaurant in Fukuoka city. Today he was going to meet with a family.

“You must be Tanaka-san, correct?”

They arrived ten minutes earlier.

“Yes.”

Jiro nodded and looked at the two people who called out to him. It was a kind salaryman and elegant woman. Both looked to be around forty years old.

These two – the Matsushima couple – were candidates to be Misaki’s foster

parents. They seemed to be a warm and kind couple. That was the impression Jiro got from them; not bad for a first impression.

“Let’s go in,” they entered the restaurant under Jiro’s suggestion.

The day after the incident, Jiro went to a foster care person to help him find a new family for Misaki. He was then presented several conditions and following them he had found the Matsushima household.

According to the agent, he would have to meet with the foster family and discuss Misaki before making the final decisions. The day he had to directly meet with the foster family, talk to them, and evaluate them as they would be taking care of his child was today.

“Welcome. Three people? Do you smoke?”

The couple shook their head at the employee’s question.

“I also don’t smoke.”

Jiro added.

“Then I’ll take you to the non-smoking area over there.”

The shop attendee brought the three of them further inside.

Everything was taken care of by the mediator beforehand and referred to him, so this was the first time Jiro met with the Matsushima family in person. Once they sat down at their table, Jiro turned to them and bowed. “Thank you for coming all the way out here today.”

The Matsushima couple lived in Niigata. The two came all the way to Fukuoka just for their interview.

“Oh, it’s no problem.” The husband shook his head without a moment’s delay. “When we were approached on this, it honestly felt like a dream come true for us. We would have flown here for our future child’s sake.”

Jiro was happy to hear him say that.

“.....Speaking of Misaki.”

After they had conversed for a few minutes, Jiro brought up the important detail.

“She had been abused by her step-father for a long period of time.”

The two made a small gasp and frowned sympathetically.

“Her heart is complex, and I hope that you can be patient with her to open up to you.”

“Don’t worry,” the husband told him. “My wife has the credentials for counseling.”

“Is that so?”

Jiro pretended to be surprised. He already had Enokida look up their personal history. The wife, Yukie, worked as a middle school counselor before she married. She had apparently worked with children who were victims of bullying or had family issues. According to Enokida, the husband had no connection to the underground world, and they were an ordinary family. The company he worked for was clean as well, and it looked like his pay was well.

“I’m sure that will help Misaki-chan.”

“For many years we have always wished to have a child.” The wife spoke. “But I don’t have a body that could allow us to have one.....”

“It’s not your fault.”

Her husband wrapped an arm around his wife and smiled.

“We’ll definitely make Misaki-chan happy.”

The wife nodded deeply at her husband’s words. “We promise.”

Jiro imagined Misaki being with these two and her future living happily with this kind couple.

“.....Thank you very much.”

He decided.

He was sure these two would take care of Misaki. He would entrust his child to them.

“Please take care of Misaki.”

Jiro stood up and deeply bowed his head.

Bottom of the Extra Tenth Inning

“.....I’m disappointed in you.”

Kunio Yamazaki slammed down the morning paper from a week ago. Sanjou grimaced when he saw the header: ‘The culprit behind the child kidnappings has been arrested.’

There was a familiar name mentioned in the article. ‘Unemployed – Yuuta Kase has been arrested.’ Sanjou had bought out the police to pin the whole crime on Kase to save their hide.

“How much money do you think I spent to cover up this incident?”

Kunio went through his own fair amount of troubles as well since it was his company’s truck that had been found. His usual gentle expression was that of a demon today. He was thoroughly livid.

“My greatest apologies.”

Sanjou deeply bowed his head.

It was the worst outcome. The Mutagawa Group’s loss of profits for this failure was immense. They did not just fail to carry out their deal with the human trafficker but even their trust with the Yamazaki Transportation company was harmed as well.

“So,” Kunio sat across from Sanjou in the usual coffee shop and brought up the main point of their discussion today. “What did you need to talk to me about?”

“Truth is-”

Sanjou madly pursued after the avenger for the past month.

“I know the avenger has a daughter.”

“And what of it?”

Kunio sulked, but Sanjou suggested, “would it be alright to present his daughter to Mieko-san?”

He needed to fulfill his daughter’s revenge to make Kunio feel better and restore their damaged relationship with Yamazaki Transportation.

“.....I see.”

Kunio finally showed interest.

“You plan on making up for your failure with this?”

“At the very least, it is an apology.”

Kunio pondered to himself for a few moments.

“If you can carry out this revenge, Mieko may feel better.”

He gave his approval.

“And how do you plan to kidnap his daughter?”

“We won’t kidnap her. The avenger himself will give her to us.”

Kunio knit his eyebrows. “What do you mean?”

“The avenger put his daughter up as a child for adoption.”

Ishihara had seen both the avenger and the daughter. Sanjou never would have imagined one of the children his men had kidnapped would coincidentally be the avenger’s daughter.

Sanjou first looked to find out who his daughter was. According to Ishihara, the girl was a second or third year elementary schooler. Sanjou hired several informants and had them look at all the elementary schools in Fukuoka. It costed him a lot, but they had found the girl in question and even figured out where the avenger lived as well.

He was going to attempt to abduct his daughter, but the avenger had a strong fortitude. The avenger must have become weary since the last time and had hired a guard for his daughter. There was a brawny black man who would accompany her to school and pick her up later.

After observing the avenger for a while, Sanjou found something unexpected. The avenger met up with a mediator from a foster home. He was going to put his daughter up for adoption. Sajou had paid the agent so he could meet with the avenger as a foster parent.

After Sanjou explained everything that he had done, Kunio made a bitter expression. “He would be skeptical. He would look into the foster parents’

history."

Sanjou already knew that. He had a counte plan set up. "I have a brother of a different father who lives in Niigata. He lives with his wife, and they don't have kids yet. They're an ordinary family. His wife worked as a counselor. If I paid them to use their names, the avenger wouldn't question our identities. Fortunately for me, my facial features are similar to my brother. I should be able to deceive him even if he looked up what his face looks like."

And the plan was a success.

Sanjou hired an elegant looking woman who resembled his brother's wife, a hostess he knew working at a high class club. She was a sharp woman and she understood the gist of everything that was going on after meeting with him just once. She did not lack in acting skills to pretend to be his wife.

The avenger was completely deceived and chose Sanjou as a foster parent. He would give them his daughter tomorrow at eight at night. The avenger told him he would have someone else to hand her over at the place they decided on.

"It'll go smoothly, right?"

Kunio questioned dubiously.

"Yes," Sanjou would make it happen. He nodded deeply. "I'm sure of it."

Translation Notes:

When Jiro screamed "what are you doing to my daughter?!" he dropped all his feminine speech and completely went full aggressive masculine in Japanese. To say he was pissed is an understatement. While he has adjusted his speech pattern for appearances before, he's never gone this hardcore masculine before in the entire series.

Extra Eleventh Inning

Top of the Extra Eleventh Inning

The time to part was drawing near. This would be the last time they would have a meal together. The girl, unaware of this, stuffed her cheeks full of omelette rice like usual.

“Is it good?”

Misaki nodded when Jiro asked. “Yeah.”

“I see. I’m glad to hear it.”

Jiro rested his head on his hand and watched Misaki closely. Since this was the last time he could see this scene, he wanted to burn it into his memory.

He thought back on the past. The first time he had brought Misaki here, she would not sit down at the table. Her step-father had always abused her at meal time. As such, she was afraid around dinner time. She hated to sit down and eat at the table.

And now she has become able to do that. That was enough for him.

Misaki suddenly mentioned. “The first thing you had me eat was omelette rice, wasn’t it?”

“Now that you mention it, yes it was.”

It was from a family restaurant though. Jiro smiled bitterly.

“That omelette rice was really good, but I love the omelette rice you make, Jiro-chan.”

“Really?” Jiro smiled. “That makes me happy.”

Misaki continued to scoop up and devour her meal without restraint when she suddenly stopped.

She was looking at him with upturned eyes. “.....Hey, Jiro-chan.”

“What is it?”

“Why are you crying?”

Once she said that, Jiro noticed for the first time that he was crying.

“.....Oh dear.” He quickly wiped his eyes. “I’m not sure why.”

Misaki realized what was going on immediately. She was smart.

“Jiro-chan.....What did you do to me.....?”

Jiro had mixed a sleeping drug in her juice.

Misaki was overcome by sleep, and she reeled. She slumped against the table and fell asleep.

“.....I’m sorry, Misaki.”

He reached for her small head.

“Goodbye,” he gently brushed his hand through her hair and placed a kiss on her head. “Thank you for everything.”

The intercom rang. A guest had arrived. Jiro headed to the door and opened it. Lin stood there. He was on time. “I’ll leave the rest to you.”



‘I have a favor to ask you.’

Jiro told him the night before.

‘Misaki is going to be given to her foster parents tomorrow night. I want you to accompany her there.’

Naturally Jiro could not drop Misaki off. He admitted it himself. He could have a change of heart and waver on his decision in the middle of the exchange. He had no confidence in being able to hand Misaki over to them, so he needed someone else to do it for him.

‘I do get where you’re coming from,’ Lin shook his head. ‘But why me? Couldn’t you have Banba or Mar do it instead?’

‘Those two would be soft on her.’

Jiro replied with a bitter smile.

And the following day, Lin did as asked and went to Jiro's apartment to get Misaki. He picked up the dozing Misaki and put her in a taxi before taking off to meet her foster parents. Once Lin got out of the taxi, he carried Misaki on his back and walked to the park where they would meet up. He then laid her small body out on the bench and sat down next to her. They still had time before the foster parents showed up.

After a couple of minutes, Misaki began to shift.

"You awake?"

Misaki still seemed to be drowsy as she was looking around her surroundings with dull eyes. ".....Where are we?"

The last thing she knew she was in her house, and now she was on a bench in a park. She had not yet caught up with her situation.

"Jiro asked me to take you to your foster parents."

".....Foster parents?"

"Yeah. You're going to be living with a new family as of today."

Misaki's complexion turned pale when he said that.

"No." She drew closer to Lin, looking as though she would burst into tears at any moment. "Why-"

"You have got to know after what just happened. You know how dangerous the world we live in is now, right?"

She was still an elementary school girl, but she was quick-witted. She understood everything that was going to happen to her.

"No!" Misaki stood up and yelled. "I won't go anywhere! I'm staying with Jiro-chan!"

"Sit back down," Lin ordered her in a stern voice. Misaki swallowed, seeing his eyes filled with killing intent.

"Please, just do as you're told. I don't want to be rough with you." Lin gave a sigh and placed a hand on Misaki's shoulder. She obediently sat back down on the bench.

He understood how she felt. There was no way she could accept leaving Jiro like this.

Seeing Misaki bite her lips to stop herself from crying, Lin quietly told her. "There is one thing I learned because of you and Jiro."

".....What is it?" Misaki asked, her gaze still downward.

Lin recalled what happened back then. The memory of them embracing each other and crying was still vivid in his head.

"You can become family without having to be blood related."

He was exactly right, Lin smiled bitterly.



At this rate, Misaki would be separated from Jiro. She had to do something. But she was not confident that she could get away from Lin. If she attempted to run from this spot, he would use any method available to him to capture her. And he was capable of doing that, which was why Jiro had asked him to be with her in the first place.

But Misaki had nowhere else she belonged than with Jiro. And Jiro wanted them to part, so now she was being sent to foster parents.

There was nothing she could do. She felt the strength to fight leave her. Once Misaki obediently sat down on the bench, Lin nodded his approval, "that will do. Here, I have your belongings."

Lin handed Misaki her red bag. It was the one she got at the Houjouya festival, but she took a liking to it and kept using it since. Her cell phone and wallet were inside it.

She took the cell phone and began to fidget with it. She noticed her list of contacts in it had decreased. ".....Everyone's numbers are gone."

It was no just Jiro's number that was missing. Martinez, Banba, Enokida and the rest of the Ramens' numbers were removed. Everything was gone: messages, call history, photos she took – everything.

"Jiro deleted them. He probably thought it would be better that you didn't

have any connections with someone in the underground.” Lin told her.

Misaki immediately felt overcome by loneliness. A chill ran through her, feeling as though she was being cut away from the world everyone was in.

“You may face danger because of Jiro. Or you could be used as bait and Jiro gets hurt. That’s why he’s doing this. You’re not an idiot, so you understand, right?”

Misaki nodded silently and hung her head. She understood why. Jiro did this for her sake.

“You’re still a kid. You can’t do anything on your own.”

It hurt to admit it, but Lin was right.

“However.....I guess you just have to try harder then, right?”

Misaki raised her head hearing that. She looked up at Lin with wide eyes.

He smiled at her teasingly.

“Here,” Lin told her as he gave her a white sheet of paper with a phone number on it.

“It’s Jiro’s number.”

Misaki’s eyes widened even further in shock. “.....Eh?”

“Keep this a secret from Jiro,” Lin smirked.

“Why-”

Why would he do this?

Misaki was stunned. In turn, he admonished her. “Try living a normal life for now. Who knows; maybe you’ll find it works out for you. But if you try out the normal life and still want live the dangerously as an avenger, then make your resolve by then.”

“Resolve?”

“The resolve to pass the line.” Lin added. “People like us won’t have a happy life; we’re criminals after all.”

Lin was a hitman. So was Banba. And Genzo was one too. Enokida was an

informant and Martinez was a torturer. Everyone had already had the resolve to live their lives like this.

It was the same for Jiro.

"You went through a painful experience this past time, right? That's just a common occurrence in our daily lives. Once you make the resolve to live that life as well," Lin glanced down at the paper. "Call that number and make him come get you."

Misaki gripped the white paper tightly.

"Come see us again once you get big and strong – to your real family."

Until then, it was goodbye for now.

Misaki nodded. She carefully took the paper with the number written on it and placed it in her bag.

"Look. They're here." Lin pointed with his chin. "There's your foster parents."

When Misaki turned around she saw a man walking towards her.

"And now it's goodbye."

Bottom of the Extra Eleventh Inning

"That girl will be here for certain, right?" Mieko Yamazaki asked while puffing out smoke in the backseat.

"Yes," Sanjou replied, still gripping the wheel and facing forward. "We're to meet her at the designated park today."

"You do know what will happen if she's not there, right?"

Mieko tossed the used cigarette out the window and put a new one in her mouth. This was the fourth one. What Kunio had mentioned about her smoking more since her son's death was apparently true.

Although annoyed by the arrogant woman's attitude, Sanjou conceded. "Of course."

They were heading to a small park where the girl in question would be waiting at. Sanjou pulled over to the side of the road once they arrived in front of the

park.

“Please wait here.” Sanjou instructed Mieko as he got out of the car. “I’ll go get the child.”

Proceeding into the park, he saw a bench where a young woman and a small girl were sitting at. It was the stand-in for the avenger and the avenger’s daughter Misaki.

“Good evening,” Sanjou approached them and bowed his head with a smile. “I’m Matsushima. I’ve come to pick up Misaki.”

The woman stood up from the bench and replied, “I’ll leave the rest to you.” She then placed a hand on Misaki’s head and said to her as she left, “until next time.”

Misaki watched her retreating form reluctantly.

“Well then, shall we go?”

When Sanjou lent out a hand to her, Misaki nodded wordlessly and took it. She was shy around him but otherwise did not seem to be weary of him. Sanjou pulled the girl’s hand and returned to the car.

Mieko had gotten out of the backseat and was waiting for them.

“Nice to meet you, Misaki-chan.”

She forced a smile. She crouched down in front of Misaki and examined her face.

“Starting today, we’re going to be your family.”

After Mieko hugged Misaki she put her in the back seat, “let’s go.” She then put on and fastened the seat belt over her small body.

Sanjou got in the driver’s seat. When he glanced in the rearview mirror, he saw Mieko chatting with Misaki with a smile. She was truly acting as though she was trying to connect with her new child, but she must be seething in fury on the inside. He found her to be frightening.

Mieko’s wish was to torment the girl in front of the avenger in the same manner her son was killed. And to do that she needed this girl to contact the

avenger without her being suspicious of it.

The plan began to move.

“That reminds me.” Once the doors locked and the car took off, Mieko pretended to have recalled something. “I have forgot to mention something to your father. I want to contact him, but can you tell me his number?”

Misaki nodded earnestly.

“Here,” she took out a white scrape of paper from her bag and gave it to Mieko. “It’s my father’s cell phone.”

“Thank you.”

Mieko smiled and took out her cell phone. She immediately rang up the number listed on the paper.

“Hello?” The call seemed to have connected. There was a sudden change to Mieko’s voice. “Good evening, mister avenger.”

The moment Misaki heard those words, Sanjou saw her face stiffen from the rearview mirror.

“I’ve got your precious daughter. What should I do to your cute and adorable Misaki-chan?” Mieko smirked.

The avenger appeared to have been at a loss for words as he seemed to have remained silent.

“Hey, are you listening to me?Whatever. Please come by yourself to the location I tell you. I’m going to give you quite the show.”

Mieko gave him an address and emphasized the condition of coming alone.

She then turned to Misaki and pressed her cell phone to her face, “here. Let your daddy hear your voice.”

“.....Hurry and come save me,” Misaki spoke, scared. “Please.”

Sanjou and his men took up positions in the abandoned warehouse that sat quietly on the outskirts of the city. They had two men stationed outside the building.

“What a despicable child.” Mieko spoke with resentment towards Misaki who

was sitting in a chair. "I want to kill her as soon as possible."

She held a handgun in her right hand. It was one of the Mutagawa Group's products.

"Your father took my Shota from me." Mieko pressed the barrel of the gun to Misaki's cheek. "I'll avenge him. I'll torment you in front of your father. I'll pull out your hair, peel off your skin and mince you up.....You want to see your father sobbing and pleading for forgiveness, right?"

Mieko gave a high pitched laugh, but Misaki remained silent.

She was the avenger's daughter. She did not cry once. That did not amuse Mieko, and her mood turned sour. She put a cigarette in her mouth and lit it. "He's late. What is he doing?"

After a few more minutes, they heard the engine of a car.

"Look. Your beloved father has arrived."

Mieko glanced over to Misaki and froze for an instant.

".....What's so funny?"

The girl had a slight smile and was shaking from suppressed laughter.

Sanjou and his men all exchanged glances, frowning.

"You're a naive woman." Misaki looked up at Mieko and grinned. "Both you and your son were lost causes. A stupid son and a stupid parent."

"What did you say?" Mieko's face contorted in confusion.

Just then, they heard a man's yell. It was one of the lackey's.

"You still haven't figured it out?" Misaki smirked. "I didn't hand you my father's phone number back there."

She was referring to the piece of paper she had handed Mieko earlier.

"What?" Sanjou's eyes widened. "Whose number is it?"

At that, Misaki glanced over to the entrance. "It was that person's."

The side entrance to the warehouse had opened.

"Who-"

Sanjou was at a loss of words when he saw who appeared.

It was a clown.

He instantly recalled what Ishihara had told him. 'He was really odd. He was dressed up like a freakin' clown.'

There was no doubt the man in front of them was the same person who attacked Carlos and everyone in the bar.

The clown had taken one of the lackeys as hostage and had a knife pressed to his throat.

"Hey, Misaki," the clown approached them. "Méqué is here to save you."

"Stop right there!" Sanjou shouted.

He immediately held up his gun and pointed it at the clown. He threatened him to not come any closer, but he could not shoot since the clown was using his subordinate as a shield.

"No." Mieko shrieked at the creepy man. "Wh-who the hell is this guy?"

"My friend."

Misaki replied.

They knew right away that he was not just a mere friend. This man was likely the same criminal who slaughtered the Noma Group's men. *How could this girl be correlated with a serial killer?*

Sanjou shook his head to dispel his thoughts. He could not worry about that right now. His main concern at the moment was how the clown got here.

"I had two pieces of paper with numbers on them in my bag. If you guys were my actual foster parents, I would have given you the right one. It was just a sleight of hand." Misaki had seen through Sanjou's mind and revealed her trick.

Mieko had called the clown, not the avenger. But that meant-

".....You figured out we weren't your foster parents?"

Misaki had given Mieko the number as soon as they got in the car. *That meant this girl had already seen through our true identities by that point?*

“Of course I did.”

Misaki snorted.

“How?” Sanjou questioned her. “How did you figure it out?”

“The smell of cigarettes.”

Misaki glared at Mieko.

“You stink, old lady. You sure are a heavy smoker. The inside of the car reeked of it. So I knew something was off right away.”

It was true that Mieko always smoked.

“He would never choose any smokers to be my foster parents.”

Sanjou’s eyes widened. *So she not only realized we were fake, but she pretended to go along with it?*

He tutted. They had set a trap, but they did not expect to have fallen into one either. Especially by a child.

“.....I’m sorry, Méqué. I didn’t mean to use a friend like you this way.”

Misaki glanced over to the clown.

“But I’ll save you if you ever get into trouble. I will do everything I can to help you.”

Sanjou looked at her face and was at a loss of words.

Are there children like this in this world?

Are there really children with such cold eyes?

“So please, Méqué,” Misaki stated. “Kill all of them.”

The clown named Méqué nodded with a smile.

“Méqué will gladly do it,” he gripped the flange of his hat and made a small bow. “Anything for a friend.”

And then the clown immediately took action.

He took off his hat and threw it at them. The moment he did something inside the hat exploded. It was a smoke bomb. Pure white smoke spread around the

area.

Once they had lost their sight, they stood stock still when they heard a woman's shriek. It was Mieko's voice.

Shit, Sanjou cursed. He quickly ran backwards to try and get away from the smoke. Mieko probably did not make it.

Just then, he saw a silhouette enter his vision. It was rushing towards him. Sanjou held up his gun and pulled the trigger. He heard men shout along with the gunshots. They were his subordinates.

Damn, he swallowed. *It wasn't him?*

At last the smoke had dispersed, and the area began to clear up gradually. Both the clown and Misaki had vanished. Mieko and his subordinates were laying on the ground of the warehouse. All of them were bleeding out and dying.

What the hell?

Sanjou felt dread raise up within him. The plan failed. And Kunio's precious daughter Mieko was dead. If Kunio heard of this, he would not remain silent. In fact, Sanjou's life would be targeted for it. He was going to get killed.

He had to get away. Somewhere far away where Kunio Transportation could not reach him. Sanjou went to the car and reached for the door to the driver's seat. He saw his emaciated expression on the glass. He fastened his seat belt and stepped on the acceleration pedal.

However, the car would not move.

He had a moment of realization. *Were the tires cut?*

Sanjou then sensed a presence behind him. He glanced at the rearview mirror and his eyes widened in shock. The clown was there in the mirror. His white face was grinning at him.

By the time Sanjou noticed him, it was already too late. The man's red arm reached for him from the backseat. The clown held a knife and sliced open Sanjou's neck. Blood spurt out from the wound, staining the front windshield in red.

The man was humming a tune.

Hero Interview & Winning Team Coach Interview

Hero Interview

“.....Whatcha cryin’ for? You’re a sad sight.”

Jiro heard Genzo’s large sigh.

“It was your decision, ain’t it?”

“.....I’m not crying.” Jiro replied back with a sniffle.

He had gotten lonely being home by himself and dropped by Genzo’s shop, considering to indulge in the influence of alcohol, but he did not feel like drinking. He could not stop thinking about Misaki.

It was exactly as Genzo said. He was pathetic. He was still second guessing his own decision.

“.....This is for the best, right?”

“You still got regrets?”

“No,” Jiro slightly shook his head and repeated as though to convince himself. “This is for the best.”

He was not mistaken. He sent his child onto the correct path. But for tonight, an unfamiliar loneliness lingered in his heart.

Genzo seemed to have considered Jiro’s feelings and placed a glass in front of him.

“Here, drink up.” He told the other as he poured beer into it. “This is my treat.”

Jiro made a small smile and reached for the glass.

“Alright. Let’s toast.”

To toast for her departure into a new life.

“Cheers.”

Just as Jiro raised his glass, he had got a call. He quickly put down the beer and took out his cell phone. “Hello?”

‘Jiro-chan.’

His eyes widened in shock when he heard the voice.

It was Misaki.

It should not be possible. *How did she get this number? All the contacts on her cell phone should have been erased off of it.*

Jiro was so shocked he was at a loss for words.

She then told him.

‘Come get me.’

Jiro hung up and immediately got into the car. The place she had instructed him to go to was an abandoned warehouse on the outskirts of Fukuoka. There was a dead body of a man in front of the side door. Another man was dead inside of a car parked outside.

What on earth happened here?

Amidst the unsettling atmosphere, Jiro opened the warehouse’s door wearily, and inside he found Misaki.

She stood up once she saw Jiro. There was a dead man and a woman at her feet.

Misaki had waited for Jiro, surrounded by bodies. Even though she should be starting her new life with her foster parents by now.

What had happened to her?

“Misaki.”

Jiro approached his child while carefully stepping around the pools of blood.

He looked Misaki over since her clothes were stained with blood. “How did you get that?”

“People got killed.”

Jiro was startled even more hearing that. “K-killed?”

Was it a spurt of blood? Then are these bodies-?

Considering the possibility, Jiro glanced towards the ground, but Misaki shook her head.

“I didn’t do it. I had someone else kill them.”

After that, Misaki explained the details of what took place: how she was taken by Lin to meet with her foster parents, how those foster parents were imposters, and how she had called for help before calling Jiro afterwards.

“.....That happened?”

Jiro hung his head in shame.

He was mad at his careless self for not seeing through the foster parent’s true identity. “I put you into a dangerous situation again.”

He had made her cross the line. He was sick of being so inadequate.

“I’m the absolute worst.....I made you kill people.”

“Not at all. You didn’t do anything wrong, Jiro-chan.”

Misaki shook her head before continuing on reassuringly.

“I chose this.”

She could have chosen not to kill them, but she did.

“If you say you don’t want to be with me, then I’ll give myself up to the police.”

“You can’t-” Jiro became speechless when those tremendous words fell from her small lips.

“It’s alright; I won’t tell them about you.”

“D-Don’t!” He finally was able to put his thoughts to words. “I absolutely will not let you do that.”

“Then let me stay with you.”

Jiro could not allow it.

“Jiro-chan,” Misaki cut him off before he could reply. “I made my resolve.”

She stared him down with a strong gaze, making him feel like he was suffocating.

She already had made up her mind. It was him who had not. Misaki thoroughly reminded him of that.

After a few moments of silence, Jiro managed to wring out.

“.....I see.”

I'm not match for her. He thought to himself and smirked.

“Alright. I'll make my resolve too.”

He made the decision to raise her as a parent and as an avenger.

“Let's go home. Kuro-chan is waiting for us.”

Misaki made a relieved expression when he held out a hand for her. She took Jiro's hand and gripped it tightly, skipping over the woman's dead body.

“Ah, that reminds me,” just as they got out of the warehouse and got in the car, Misaki recalled something she wanted to tell Jiro. “Hey, Jiro-chan.”

“What is it?”

“I made a friend.”

“Oh, really?”

Jiro was stunned, wondering when that could have happened.

“That's great. Bring them home sometime.”

“.....Okay.”

Misaki nodded and smiled.

Her smile was blindingly innocent.

Winning Team Coach Interview

The pennant race for professional baseball was coming to an end soon, but it was a perfect season for grass-lot baseball. It was the fall sport. Genzo sat down on the benches and watched the ground field, feeling refreshed.

Banba and Misaki were playing catch in front of the benches. Although

Misaki's throws were largely curved, Banba was still able to catch them.

"Whoa," Banba exclaimed, impressed. "You're gettin' the hang of it."

The elementary school girl gave a smile appropriate for her age. "Really?"

"I mean it. You're an ace. Saitou-kun might have to be careful."

Misaki was wearing a Ramens uniform like the other members. They had purchased a child-size one for her.

Enokida and Jiro were chatting pleasantly from the side of the benches.

"I heard that Misaki-chan got into the boys baseball team. Is that correct?"

Jiro nodded. "Yes, she did. She has practice twice a week and games on Saturdays as well, so I've been busying bringing her to and from the sessions."

Jiro spoke happily. After overcoming everything that had happened to them, his expression was bright.

"Is that so? What's her position?"

"Right now she's in the outfield," Jiro glanced over to Misaki and gave a wry smile. "But she wanted to be a shortstop."

"The shortstop is the star after all," Genzo nodded, arms crossed. He understood why she wanted the position.

"What did you say?"

At that, Lin interjected into the conversation as he was doing stretches in front of the benches.

"You can't get anyone out with those curved throws." He jeered at Misaki. He was being immature. "Are you looking down on the shortstop?"

Misaki snapped back, sullen. "I'm not."

"You can't be a shortstop."

Misaki smirked up at him. "I'll steal your position and be a regular player someday."

"Ha," Lin snorted. "I won't ever let you take it."

Genzo smiled as he watched the two bantering. No one had ever fought over

another Ramens member's position before. As the coach, there may be a day when he would have to plan the lineup for a game someday in the future.

"I'm lookin' forward to it," Genzo lightly smiled up at the cloudless blue sky while picturing the future. ".....I wonder if I'll still be around by then."



Afterword

I'm sorry I mention this every time, but this work is fiction. Please advice.

Even though it feels like I just made my debut and the first volume was published, now the series has its fifth installment. I'm eternally grateful. I wrote each volume a little differently as tests, like how volume two was comical and volume three was serious in tone. Contrarily, the fourth volume was light and revolved around cyber crime, so this time it was a tale of Misaki's adventure as a bit of a psychotic thriller. I hope you enjoyed Misaki, weak and yet strong-willed.

I briefly touched upon Jiro's dilemma showcased here back in volume one, but I did not anticipate to write it explicitly at first. It ended up focusing on Misaki, but I'm quite happy being able to see through with their decision. I'm grateful from the bottom of my heart for the readers who picked up this work and those who have supported me since volume one.

Publishing another new work three months after publishing the fourth volume back in August of this year has been the fastest I've ever done and my first challenge. If I were to put that in terms of baseball, I feel like a pitcher who had to pitch at games in three days instead of six. So thanks to the main editors Wada-sama and Endou-sama who had to revise this even faster than usual, to Hako Ichiro-sama for drawing beautiful illustrations while he was busy, and to many others who helped in the process, we have managed to bring this work safely to you readers.

And lastly, an announcement: a comic version will begin in monthly GFantasy. Please enjoy the manga version for this series as well. I hope you look forward to more Hakata Tonkotsu Ramens in the future!

Chiaki Kisaki

Notes:

There are two artists who have been working on the manga versions for this series: Kisara Akino and Chiaki Nagaoka.

Akino worked on the material for the first volume and Nagaoka is working on the material for the second volume. There are currently no English releases for the manga yet, but you can purchase them raw. I provided links to the raw releases on bookwalker below: